Haīl to the Kīng

A fanfiction written by

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CHAPTER
ONE

THE WORLD'S WORST FIRST IMPRESSION

The afterlife was everything I thought it would be. A serene feeling of absolute bliss filled my weightless soul as I drifted towards the purest white light I had ever seen. We have all heard stories of near-death experiences and they aren't far off the mark. High above me, but so tantalizingly close, a heavenly radiance glowed as warm and inviting as a fire in winter. All around me was nothingness, but I wasn't afraid. The void was neither cold nor terrifying because I know what awaited me. I only wished that I could move faster, to welcome the approaching light with open arms and a smile on my face.

I was so utterly and willfully entranced. This must be how moths feel right before they get zapped.

But as I approach, a curious thought struck me. Why was I so unafraid? Shouldn't death trigger some primal rejection; a rage against the heavens that my only life was over? Why did I have to go? Where would the light take me? There were so many questions, but I couldn't bring myself to address them. By all rights I should have been a nervous wreck and yet, the closer I got to the light, the more my worries melted away. It was just so peaceful, like I was drifting gently to sleep.

So tired. So very tired. I couldn't stop myself from closing my eyes.

"GRRRAAAAAAGH!" A hateful shout blasted through the void, carrying a promise of pain and terror and shocking me out of my relaxation with a startled gasp. It was so violently explosive that I shivered involuntarily. I was certain that whatever had made that shout would not be welcomed into the light.

"What was that?" I asked, discovering that I could speak, sort of. The amorphous, quintessential being of my soul sent a question into the void. It was answered with loud, angry yelling.

"Crysssssal Haaaarrttt. Crysssstttal Heaaart! Wrrragh!" the thing shouted. Looking down, I saw what it was that had disturbed the peace.

It was a living shadow. That's the best way I could describe it: a churning mass of blackness that swallowed what little light was available. I faintly saw a pair of green eyes glaring from within the shapeless black cloud, making it look like a thunderstorm that had learned how to glower. Peering closer, I could see the silhouette of a head, but it was entirely indistinct except a pair of fangs contorted into a villainous sneer. Whatever that thing was, if this is what its soul looked like then I shudder to think of what it had done in life. I watched apprehensively for a few moments hoping it would go away, but then those green eyes turned to glare straight at me.

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Something grabbed me. “Waah!” I yelped from the sudden jolt. If you’ve ever found yourself swimming in the ocean and had something brush against your leg, you’ll know why I cried out loud. I found myself encased in a dark aura, like a thick, translucent outline that seemed to be pulling me towards the shadow.

“Mine,” it chuckled darkly and began to pull harder. “Issssss MINE!”

“What? No! You’re pulling me off course. I want to go to the light. Stop that!” I pleaded but it wouldn’t listen. In fact, it actually smiled wider when it heard me beg.

Then I noticed that its eyes were no longer looking at me. Instead, it was focused squarely at the peaceful light shining directly above us. The harder the aura pulled me downward, the faster the shadow seemed to ascend. I figured it out quickly: it was taking my place. It was dragging me down so it could pull itself up. The shadow laughed as realization dawned on me.

“Stop laughing when I’m talking to you! What do you think you’re doing!?”

‘Wa Ha Ha Ha Ha,” it cackled deeply as it passed me, flinging me backwards to make itself go faster. I willed myself to fly, kicked around to change my trajectory, and even made swimming motions, but nothing seemed to have any effect. Unable to find purchase on anything, I found myself hurtling through the darkness.

“Wait. Wait! Don’t do this!”

But the shadow didn’t listen. I was just a stepping stone it used to fly towards the light. The distant radiance became clearer as it got closer. I watched it rise up while the light solidified into a perfect image of what I imagined heaven to look like; stairs as white as ivory, magnificent pearly gates, and shimmering golden ornamentations encircled by illuminated clouds. The very entrance of paradise awaited, laid out so the black shadow could ascend a stairway to heaven that should have been mine.

Strangely, it didn’t even glance at the gates, or even the source of the glistening iridescence. Instead, its full attention was wholly enraptured by the staircase leading up to it.

“Staaaairss,” it said blissfully, practically sighing in content. The fangs, barely visible in the smoky cloud of its body, warmed from a villainous grin into a genuine, joyful smile as it eagerly set upon the pristine white steps.

“That’s all you wanted?! The freaking stairs!” I sputtered. I was actually angrier about the sheer pointlessness of it all than I was about being denied paradise. I mean, he tears me away from the ultimate destination of the human soul, not so he can take it for himself, but so he can stop just in front of it. I can’t even think of a better metaphor for something so spitefully petty.

With jubilant anticipation and eyes sparkling gleefully, the shadow reached out to the steps. But second it made contact, the whole shebang blinked out of existence. The light above us, once glimmering

like a nova, went poof, just like that. The heavens became dark, as if the afterlife itself had slammed the door in its face. Admittedly, I couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction as the shadow quivered with rage.

"HHRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGH!" The heavens roiled at its thunderous outcry. The shadow held its explosive note for an entire minute, impotently screaming at the skies that denied it its precious stairs. I had never heard anyone get that inconsolably angry before.

"Take that, you jerk," I said vengefully as it roared in fervent hate. It probably wasn't a good idea to have vindictive thoughts in front of the entrance to heaven, but I couldn't help myself.

Besides, I now had greater concerns; I was still falling. The light was gone now, and I drifted – was flung, really – to wherever it was that shadow came from. I felt myself get heavier as I traveled downward, and found myself becoming exhausted. Not the blissful sleepiness I had felt earlier, but something similar to being awake for too long.

Before I could give in to despair, however, I found myself flushed with calm repose.

Once again something echoed through the emptiness. This time it was without sound: an intangible, but noticeable presence. The sense I got from it was the exact opposite of what I had felt from the roar of the shadow. It was as if something saw what had happened and wanted to help.

The void... pitied me? What a strange thought, but that's the definite sentiment I got. I don't know why, but as I started losing consciousness, the last thing I felt was an indistinct sense of sympathy. It was a rather comforting thought after all that had happened.

I couldn't help but smile, uncaring of where I drifted. At last I had the peace of mind to finally fall asleep.

My rest didn't last long before I heard the sound of a train whistle and a voice calling out to me. The noise, combined with the unwelcome feeling of wind and sunlight did everything in its power to wake me up, but I wanted nothing more than to stay asleep.

"Get off the rails, dummy!"

"Bwuh?" I grumbled, trying to blink the grogginess out of my eyes and failing miserably. I'd never been much of a morning person, and a glance to the noontime sun told me I wasn't much of a midday person either. I laid my head back down and closed my eyes. Whoever was trying to get my attention was going to have to wait a minute.

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"Move it! We can't stop this thing!"

"Myeh," I grunted, reluctantly dragging my head off the ground and yawning widely. My voice was way deeper than before. It didn't feel like a sore throat, but I worried that I might have been coming down with something. I was a little hoarse, I guess. "Alright, alright, I'm up. What'da you want?"

My mumbling was answered by another blast from the train whistle. I got to say, that thing was a pretty effective alarm clock, jolting me awake from merely up to fully up-up. There's a difference, as anyone with weird sleep schedules will tell you. I was too groggy to take in my surroundings, but the fact that there was solid ground below me was certainly a plus. Wasn't I just in a void, or space, or something? How'd I get here?

A third blow from the whistle demanded my attention. Looking up, I saw the strangest sight I'd ever seen; there was a team of horses pulling an oncoming train. Little, wide-eyed miniature horses were hooked up to the front of a pink steam-engine locomotive and running full tilt. It was one of those things that was so weird that I couldn't help but gawk dumbly as it drew closer and closer. "Whaaa..." I droned.

Why would they even need a team of horses to pull a train? That just seemed redundant. Huh, the lead one is making noises at me. It's... talking? It's telling me to get out of the way. How odd. Hold on, it was the horse who yelled at me! A talking horse just told me, in clear English, to get off the rails. "Heh," I giggled. "Man, what the heck is going on?"

I shook my head and tried to focus on more important issues, like what had happened when I blacked out. And where am I, anyway? I know for a fact there wasn't any snow when I- Did he say 'get off the rails?' It finally clicked in my head. I glanced down to see that I was, in fact, standing on train tracks. I looked back up to see the horse-drawn engine now alarmingly close and blaring its shrill whistle continuously.

"Yipe!" I yelped, jumping to the side with mere seconds to spare.

"Moron!" the lead horse voiced his opinion as the train shot past me in a blast of displaced air.

Digging myself out of the snow bank, I spat out a mouthful of dirt. "Pah! That's two near-death experiences in the space of an hour. Either there's something wrong with me, or I just gotta get my act together," I said.

You know, that was the first thing I did today. Literally my first conscious action after waking up from death itself was to jump out of the way of the world's most flamboyant locomotive. Is that really how the world wanted to greet me?

Welcome to the land of the living, son. Have a train.

Now that I was awake and not dodging public transportation, my indignation gave way to revelation. Whatever it was that eased my fears in the void was gone, so a weight began to appear in my

stomach as I collected myself off the ground. Pupils shrank, eyes widened, and my jaw dropped in realization. “Holy crap, I almost died!” I shouted to no one in particular. “Again! Wow… Wow. Okay, deep breaths. Very deep breaths. Get ahold of yourself.”

Dusting myself off I stood back up to my full height and-

“Oof!”

Fell right on my back, apparently. Jeez, I’m a klutz. I moved to get back up, hoping that my fit of uncoordination was the last bit of awkwardness I’d have to deal with today, but I stopped when I planted my hand on the ground to get back on my feet.

It wasn’t my hand. Correction, it wasn’t a hand at all. It was a hoof at the end of a short leg, like a goat.

I held it in front of my face, then stretched it out and moved it back and forth in disbelief. I went left, it went left; I went right, it went right. Left, right, left, right, left. Yep, that’s clearly my hoof. The hoof that I was moving because it is mine. My hoof. I have a hoof.

“Oh crap.”

There was a second hoof waiting for me when I looked down, with a whole other pair of them raring to go behind me. Straining my neck, I looked at my alien body and cannot deny the equine features. I tug on the tail and reach up to confirm that I had a mane, both of which were black. I idly wondered if being a horse is better or worse than being a goat, but my mind quickly caught up and realized that’s not the problem here. I am a little horse like those guys that were pulling the train; a grey horse decked out in some kind of plate armor for god knows what reason.

I start fearfully gasping with my horse-mouth, and quivering on my horse-legs, and palpitating with my horse-heart until I’m ready for a horse-panic attack. “How!?… Wha? Why!?” I sputtered incoherently. There are many situations life prepares you to deal with, and this certainly ain’t one of them. After my trip through the mortal coil, my brain was already fried, so I really wasn’t ready to deal with this level of insanity.

“No! No panicking. There’s got to be a logical explanation.” I try reassuring myself, but I find no comfort in my own lies. “Okay, maybe not a logical explanation, but there has got to be a reason for this.”

I thought I was dead. This can’t be heaven, can it? I gulped. Could I be in the other place? There were all kinds of weird transformations and punishments in *The Divine Comedy*, but I didn’t think some Italian’s revenge-fiction was an official sourcebook on the afterlife. Heck, I wasn’t even sure there was an afterlife until just a few minutes ago.

“How could this have happened? This is just too weird. This is…”

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My thoughts slowed to a halt. "... too weird. Yeah, that's exactly it: too weird." My expression turned from wide-eyed dread to a skeptical frown. There's no way this is really happening.

It was time to grab Occam's razor and start dicing.

"Alright, one option is that I'm really a horse," I said, barely acknowledging the possibility before laughing it off without a second thought. There's got to be a better explanation so, trying to think of more plausible reasons, I strained myself to remember how I got here.

"Let's see... I was falling, but I never felt any pain. That sense of euphoria faded, and I definitely felt heavier and more tired. What else?" I sat down and tapped my head. "I was heading to a bright light, something brought me to an abrupt stop, and then I felt a pulling sensation. If that really was a near death experience, and if death is 'the light at the end of the tunnel,' then falling away from the light means I'm still alive," I said hopefully. "Does that mean I'm not dead?"

It was a welcome thought, but it didn't answer that whole 'horse' thing.

"So if I'm not in a hospital, then... um," I scratched my chin with a hoof. The movement was surprisingly natural. I didn't know hooves could bend like that. "... I must be unconscious," I deduced. But this seems like it's so much more than a normal dream. Why would that be?

"Waaaaait a minute," I drawl, and then I laughed with dawning comprehension. There was only one way this could all make sense.

"I get it now. This is a coma!"

My face reddened, barely noticeable on my dark face, as I recalled the short panic I had upon seeing the hoof. It was rather embarrassing that I really believed it, if only for a second.

I took in all the details; the sights, the smells, the faint sounds. I could even feel the wind play against my fur. There was so much more detail than in my usual dreams that I started to worry that there was more to it. But then I took a closer look. Everything was too cheerfully colorful and the sounds were too inviting. The landscape was wonderfully idyllic and lacked the subtle imperfections of daily life. The mountains in the distance rose majestically, the snow was one massive plane of untarnished white, and not a single tree was dead or fallen. I found this oddly comforting, as it was more proof that this was all just a dream and I didn't need to freak out.

"Right. Nothing is real, so just roll with it," I say to myself. Talking out loud helped me organize my thoughts. I highly recommend it, at least in privacy. "I'm a horse? Okay, sure, why not. It's not like dreams are supposed to make sense. I'm dressed like Gannondorf? Alright, I'm game."

I mean, I had absolutely no frame of reference, leaving me to wonder how my mind came up with this weird scenario. I scratched my head in confusion. "Ooh! Hey, a crown. That's neat," I said, noting that it went well with the red king's cape I had on. "And there's a horn too."

"Wait. When someone's in a coma, are they allowed to know that they're in a coma? Or can it be like lucid dreaming? Lucid coma-ing?"

Only one way to find out: let's see if I can screw with reality. I focused on making something happen. I didn't care what, just as long as something weird and undeniably my fault occurred. With a few seconds of concentration, the horn on my head started glowing, which I figured was a good sign. I crossed my eyes to look at it and found, oxymoronically, that it glowed black. Focusing harder gave it purple and green colors, but further straining just made it brighter.

"C'mon, I don't just want a headlamp. Do something," I told my own horn.

A black crystal erupted from the ground in response to my commands. It looked like a solid hunk of obsidian about as tall as I was. There's no way anything did that but me, so yep, dream confirmed. "Cool. Can I do anything with it?" I asked, seeing if I could lift it. The resulting sight of the enormous crystal being ripped out of the ground and floating in the air was better than anything I would have hoped for.

"I can make it fly around with my mind! Ha. This has 'coma' written all over it," I started chuckling at the absurdity of it all. "I'm a miniaturized, regal, psychic, unicorn-wizard. It's like my brain's just pulling adjectives out of a hat. Just how far down the rabbit-hole are we going to go?"

Just for fun, I make another crystal rise up from under my feet. The longer I concentrate, the more it ascends with me atop it. Forcing it to curve forward, I found that I could remain at the top of it while the pillar of dark crystal shot straight ahead with surprising speed, creating a solid trail behind me.

"I can ride it." I laughed childishly. "Ha ha! I'm officially calling it: reason is dead and madness is law. This is gonna be the best coma ever."

So I had a means of travel, now the only question was where I was going to go. The scenery was nice, but I'd rather find someone to interact with. All around me was nothing but nature, and the only sign of other people was the train tracks I had woken up on. There were definitely other horses pulling that train on foot – hoofing it, as may be the case – so distance must not be an issue. I bet if I followed those tracks, it will lead me straight to civilization in no time.

There was only one sensible option. I picked a direction and followed the tracks.

After sorting through every imaginable reason for my situation, I was now a firm supporter of my 'this is a coma' theory. Nothing else made a lick of sense. The black crystals below me moved ever forward, carrying me across the land like I was surfing on solid rock. The blowing of the wind, the sensation of movement, and the slight nervousness of being high off the ground were so much more

realistic than any normal dream. I chalked it up to the difference between normal sleep and a coma and tried to enjoy myself.

Exhilarating as rock-surfing might be, I was starting to wonder if I had gone the right way. Forest had given way to snowy plains and the gentle wind became a gusting flurry. After traveling this long, I was surprised that nothing had happened yet. Dreams work on expectations, not desires. At least, that's how it's been in my experience. If you think to yourself 'I sure hope this doesn't happen,' in a dream, whatever it was you thought about will immediately occur whether you like it or not. Good or bad, your mind will always throw you something to keep you occupied. I wasn't even aware that boredom was possible. Maybe I should go somewhere else.

Op! Spoke too soon, there was a cityscape just now showing up on the horizon. I smirked. Awfully convenient that a city would appear right when I was about to turn around. What did I tell you? This was totally a coma.

Not wanting to waste a moment, I made my wave of crystal go faster, higher, and aim straight for the city. I made it to the outskirts in record time.

The city, or town by the size of it, was a perfect circle of development with a huge tower in its center. Roads radiated out from the central tower and branched outward into several capillaries. When seen from above, the road plan resembled an enormous snowflake, and there wasn't a single house or business out of line with its impeccable symmetry.

"Must be one of those planned communities," I frowned. I never liked those; suburbia seemed like it'd be a boring place to live. This whole town looks like they were more concerned with maintaining its pattern than with developing a workable city.

Once I reached the edge of the town, I stopped my crystalline transport and made several black spires rise to form a staircase for me to descend. I hopped the last couple in my excitement. You know, just 'cause.

I cantered into the town, looking back and forth in interest. To my surprise, it was a whole community of little, crystalline horses going about their lives like they think they're people. Every last one of them glimmered in the sun as if they were made of glass. I grinned happily. "Yes! More fun craziness. I'll name one of them Shiny and we'll go on adventures."

I noticed that the horses were somewhat shorter than me and a lot more colorful, so I wondered whether or not I was one of them. "Maybe I'm a different race or something," I mused. None of them had horns, like the one I sported. How come I didn't get a shimmery coat like they did?

As I was trotting along, taking in the sights like a tourist, one of the horses idly glanced my way and nearly tripped. Its eyes went wide and its mouth slowly opened as its jaw went slack. It looked like it

saw a ghost. “Hi,” I greeted. It was on the other side of the street, so I was loud enough to grab the attention of many of the other horses.

The creatures milling about the street stopped in unison, some of them with a hoof still suspended in the air. I swear to God I heard a record scratch.

“They’re… uh, all staring,” I mumbled under my breath. I suspiciously checked back and forth at myself and the light-colored, bright, shiny citizens, and looked for differences. The most obvious disparity was my coloration. “It’s not because I’m black, is it?”

Every pair of eyes shrunk to pinpricks when they saw me standing in the street. Whichever ones that had not noticed me turned to see what the silence was all about, and they too hushed up. It was like a scene from those old westerns, where someone would enter the saloon and the music would stop. Not a single one of them blinked. I could hear some of them whisper to each other. “By Celestia, it’s him,” said one. “This can’t be happening,” said another.

Did I do something wrong? I’d obviously never been here before, so why were they looking at me like I was a wanted criminal? I needed to break the tension somehow, so I gave them a polite cough. “Um… hello?” I said hesitantly. Like deer caught in headlights, they didn’t move a muscle. Even the fearful whispering stopped, leaving the entire city block absolutely frozen and silent. This was the most surreal moment of my life.

The awkward silence stretched on until something bumped against my leg and I heard a squeak from one of the horses. A little rubber ball rolled into me and a tiny filly just to the side visibly trembled and tried to avert her eyes. She must be afraid of me for some reason.

I couldn’t ask for a better ice-breaker. Using my psychic horn-powers, I levitated her ball back to her. I wished I could find a way to change the color of the horn’s aura, since the nightmarish swirl of dark colors wasn’t doing me any favors. I placed the ball right in front of her and slowly rolled it to bump into her legs.

She didn’t react at all. Her eyes were so fixated on the ground that I doubt she even noticed it. Oh well, alien species or not, it takes a special kind of evil to scare a little kid out of her wits and not do something about it, so I trotted over and gave her my brightest, most cheerful smile to calm her down.

“Hi, there,” I said, using a tone most people reserve for housecats. I tried to sound as friendly as possible because I didn’t want to frighten the poor thing anymore than she already was. Unfortunately, with the dark and gravelly voice of this body, it wasn’t much of an improvement. She very slowly tilted her head up to see me standing right in front of her. I waved a hoof in greeting.

The little filly gasped in response, taking a sharp intake of breath and started screaming bloody murder.

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"AAAIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" she let out an ear-piercing shriek, easily as loud as a fog horn but much, much higher pitched. I could actually feel the sound vibrate in my lungs, making me cringe and grit my teeth from the sheer volume of it. Covering my ears did nothing.

Several more horses poked their heads out their windows and doors to find out what the racket was all about. Honestly, I'd have liked an explanation too. I was just as confused as anyone else.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!" the filly explained, pointing a hoof at me. I immediately sat down and held my forelegs up to prove that I had done nothing to her. I didn't want to have a mob on my hands. Hooves. Whatever.

But they didn't get angry. In fact, whatever it was the filly saw in me, they saw it too because they all screamed just as loud. "AAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

The remaining towns-horses still on the ground began wailing alongside them, as if knocked out of their trance by the sudden yelling. It seems they just needed one good jolt to shake them out of their stupor and panic began spreading through the town like wildfire.

"He's back!" I heard from the crowd. Over the general chaos were a few more exclamations that weren't fearful shrieks. "Everypony run for your lives!" "Take anyone but me!" "We're doomed! Doomed!"

Holy crap, these guys are terrified! What in the heck do they think I did? All I've said so far was some variation of 'hello.' But still, doors slammed and shutters locked. The little horses bolted to whatever shelter they could find, including strangers' houses and locked storefronts. I saw one of them smash straight through a wall and leave a perfect outline like something out of a Roadrunner cartoon.

"It's King Sombra! Hide, everypony. His dark magic will corrupt us all!"

"I'm... who?" I ask. This is my first time hearing that name. King Sombra? Who was that, and why did they think I'm him? I blinked confusedly and tried to reach out to one of the madly sprinting horses.

"Excuse me. Do you know what-" It zipped away before I could even finish my question. I noticed that they keep saying 'everypony,' so I'm going to stop referring to them as horses now. Calling them ponies seems so much more appropriate given their size.

"Can anyone, I mean, anypony, tell me-" Zip. A second pony dashed away fast enough to blow my mane. "Man, these guys are quick." Oh well, third time's a charm.

"Will you-" Zip.

"Hey-" Zip-zip.

"Would one of you!-" Zip.

Why wasn't anyone listening to me? This was supposed to by my dream. They should be rushing to greet me or offer me a smoothie or something. "Would someone please tell me what's going on?!" I shouted, though no one was willing to answer.

By now there was only one left. The final pony, antsy with fear, was dashing back and forth in the street like a squirrel stuck in traffic. "You there, don't run off. I just want to talk. King, uh, Sombrero commands you," I ordered using the name they called me, but once the pony got an eyeful of me it disappeared. It was instantaneous. One second it was there, and then I heard an explosive ping like the sound of a ricochet, and suddenly it was gone. I didn't even see what direction it went. All that was left was a slowly dissipating silhouette of dust where it was standing.

And that's the last of them. I was left alone in an empty street. The only sign of life was the way the shutters on houses would open up a crack for its inhabitants to watch me, but then slam shut whenever I glanced in their direction.

"Awesome. My own dream apparitions hate me. I wonder what a psychologist would say about this," I grumbled. "And what did they mean by 'dark magic?'"

Sure, the aura around my horn was black, but all I've done is levitate stuff. I knew for a fact that some of the ponies were casually using their magic-slash-psychic-powers before they started panicking. I can't really say I've done anything dark, right?

Unfortunately, I took one glance behind me and my argument fell to pieces.

"Oh... that," I observed dryly. The wave of black crystal I surfed on to get here towered over most of the city's buildings, neatly bisecting a portion of the landscape and preventing passage from one side to the other. The ominous, ebony wall stood in stark contrast to the sparkling streets and buildings, and jagged black spires jutted out from its entire malicious surface. "Yup, that's certainly dark magic. That must be what they meant." Why does my mind keep coming up with this stuff?

"I, uh, I'm sure I can clean that all up. Just give me a sec," I announced to the hiding ponies.

The horn on my head flared with an inky, black, smoke-like aura before it was immediately subsumed by a throbbing, inimical purple blob. Bits of sickly green colors welled around inside the aura like the bubbles in a witch's cauldron as I prepared unleash my magic. The black crystal wall in front of me was slightly reflective, so I could see that my eyes glowed green and spilled over with a foggy, purple mist.

Seriously, I needed to change the color of this thing. I mean, sheesh, could I look any more like an evil sorcerer?

I should point out, by the way, that I had no earthly clue what I was doing. I was still working with the theory that this was all a dream, and that the whole world was under the sway of my godlike powers. As far as I was concerned, the mechanics of spellcasting began and ended with me willing it to

happen. At least, that's how everything so far seemed to work. I was expecting the wall to disappear quietly in a nice, clean puff of smoke, so I charged up my magic horn-blob as much as I could, aimed at the wall of black crystal, and released it all at once.

Princess Cadence, current ruler of the Crystal Empire, rifled through an endless stack of paperwork at her desk. The term 'empire' may be a bit of a misnomer for the puny vassal state of neighboring Equestria because, while it may have been a vast and expansionist realm under King Sombra's tyrannical reign, nowadays days it consisted of one rather small city in the icy north. The citizens of the empire had been in stasis for an entire millennium before Cadence took office, and it had been a herculean effort on her part to bring the nation up to modern standards. Just about every sector needed to be reworked from the ground up; the ponies' thousand-year absence required mass reeducation, agriculture still wasn't up to snuff, and their economy would tank if it weren't for Celestia's assistance. Worse, none of her advisers had a solid grasp of modernity, let alone today's international relations, so she couldn't even foist some of her workload off on them.

Cadence now realized why Celestia put up with those nobles in Canterlot.

You can't just plop a whole new society into the world and expect everything to run smoothly. The empire was in dire straits fiscally, since they had few things of value to trade with the rest of Equestria. Then, because so many crystal ponies wanted to see how the world changed in their absence, or seek new opportunities, their population was rapidly shrinking. All in all, with its incompetent officials, limited prospects, outdated or undeveloped infrastructure, dwindling populace, and northern location, the Crystal Empire was Equestria's Detroit.

Setting a scroll onto her disappointingly small 'finished' pile and taking another from the top of her intimidatingly large 'to do' pile, Cadence heard a loud rumbling noise, like the sound of thunder, coming from somewhere outside her palace.

"Hmm? There is no storm scheduled for today. Should I have somepony look into it?" she wondered before shaking her head and getting back to work. Her husband Shiny would take care of any problems with the weather patrol. Besides, she had so much more work that needed to be done that she couldn't afford to let herself get distracted now. Cadence needed to find a quick way to kick-start their finances or else the whole city was pretty much boned.

"Hosting the Equestria games might help," she muttered. Another scroll, another stamp, another signature, on and on it went.

Minutes pass in boring, but productive silence until the stillness was shattered by a crytal pony guard slamming through the ornate doors of her private office. The princess jumped at the sudden interruption, scattering several papers to the floor.

“King Sombra is attacking the city!” the guard screamed, catching his breath. Cadence paled considerably, dropping all her work and giving the guard her full attention.

“What? No, I can’t possibly have heard that right. Guard, say that again.” Oh, she knew exactly what she heard, but was simply hoping for another answer. Any other answer.

“Sombra. Edge of city. South. Boom,” he wheezed out between deep gasps for air, pantomiming an explosion with his forelegs.

Cadence felt her knees buckle at that accursed name, but she managed to get ahold of herself before she could show any weakness.

“Alert the entire guard! Have them see to the civilians and keep escape routes open. Get everypony to safety!” she shouted as she dove out of her office. She used her wings for extra thrust to gallop to the palace balcony.

The palace was the tallest structure for miles so the balcony had a clear view of the whole city. Throwing her front hooves over the railing, she squinted towards the south where many of her ponies seemed to be fleeing in terror. That alone was horrifying enough, but what she saw in the sky made her jaw drop.

She saw countless black crystals – an unmistakable sign of King Sombra’s presence – rain down upon her city in chunks the size of watermelons. “No,” she whispered, bringing a trembling hoof to her mouth. “Not now. Not after all we’ve been through.”

“Cadence!” She heard the familiar voice of her husband rushing to meet her on the balcony. Shining Armor, a white unicorn in a metal captain’s uniform barreled through the door. “There you are.”

“Shiny! It’s him. He’s back.”

“I heard. We have to get down there. There’s no telling how much damage he’s done to the city. ” He joined her at the railing, coldly staring at the barrage of crystals.

“Right. But we can’t rush in there headlong. We need a plan,” she said, scanning the city for which areas were the most threatened. “I doubt anypony could defeat him in single combat, but the Crystal Heart can obliterate him instantly. What we have to do is hold him back long enough to prepare the Crystal Heart and gather enough ponies to empower it”.

It was an obvious strategy, but really it was their only realistic course of action. She left unsaid the real problem of how, exactly, they would stall King Sombra. Shining, however, was more than willing to step up to the plate.

"You prepare the Heart. I'll stop him."

"Shiny, no."

He pulled her in close to stop further complaints and stroked his wife's mane reassuringly. "I don't need to beat him; I just need to keep him occupied. I can do this. I've done it before."

"And you are lucky all he did was seal your magic," Cadence pushed him at arm's length. "This time we are not safely behind a force field. There's nowhere to run; Sombra is already inside the city."

"What other choice do we have?" he asked simply but firmly. "You're the only one the crystal ponies respect enough to listen to, and I'm the only other pony who stands a chance against Sombra. Cadence, please. I have to go. Do you see this?" he pointed at his cutie mark. "My talent is protecting others, but every time I've been called upon I've failed. I wasn't there when Discord broke free, I was too weak-willed to stop Chrysalis from hypnotizing me, and I was useless the first time Sombra attacked us. I need to do this, Cadence. This is what I am meant to do. Let me protect you. Let me protect this city."

Cadence hesitated. What good was being an alicorn if you can't defend the ones you love? She hated the fact that she couldn't personally take on all her people's burdens herself like the goddess they thought she was. It was frustrating, but she knew Shining Armor was right, and the more she watched the crystals barrage her city, the angrier she became.

"Alright. But you come straight back to me the moment things get too dangerous."

"I'll be just fine," he smiled. "Don't you worry."

Not wanting to waste another moment, lest she change her mind, Cadence grabbed her husband in a tight grip and, steeling herself, dove off the balcony. Catching an air current with her wings, she soared over her city as the King laid siege to it. Already, her guards had been sortied and many of her ponies would be fleeing towards the palace.

She would have to work fast; every moment that passed was another chance for Sombra to hurt her ponies. Princess Cadence located the section of town that appeared the most chaotic and made a beeline for it.

"Never again, King Sombra."

“I am so sorry!” I roared as sharp black rock rained down from the sky. I destroyed the wall all right, but I wound up detonating the whole thing and sending the pieces skyward like a volcano. The shards now descended on the city in an obsidian hailstorm, causing massive amounts of property damage wherever they collided into buildings and streets.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap, oh crap,” was my mantra as I tried to catch the falling shards with my horn’s telekinesis. There was no way I could grab all of them, so I at least tried to stop the big ones. “I can fix this,” I told myself, even as a block of crystal slammed into the ground beside me. “I got this. I so got this.” Managing to grab a dozen of the largest pieces at once, which took up so much concentration that I began sweating, I began lowering them to the ground where they could do no harm.

“See! I can fix this.”

But then a baseball-sized chunk smacked me in the head, breaking my focus. “Ow!” The black boulders, now free from my control, fell to earth and smashed a hole in a couple of roofs. One of them obliterated someone’s awning.

“Oh man, this is gonna take forever to clean up,” I said, glancing around at the destruction I had accidentally caused. “And there are so many more still falling!”

There’s no way I can prevent these buildings from being leveled. I can stop a few of the larger ones at a time, but the little ones will pepper the town until the whole place was moonscape. I needed help.

As if answering my thoughts, a big, blue, transparent dome shimmered into existence above the rooftops, preventing any more of the shards from crashing into the city. The remaining dark crystals harmlessly pattered into the bubble and rolled down to the uninhabited city outskirts.

“Did I do that?” I wondered.

“It’s the princess!” someone cried with palpable relief. I looked to see where she was pointing and saw a flying pony heading straight for me. Assuming that a glowing horn means their magic powers are being used, she was the one who saved the town. She had wings in addition to her horn and was a light pink color.

A magical, pink, pony princess: wow, brain, my dreams have gotten girly. The apparent princess was holding someone in her forelegs, another unicorn, who was a guy going by size and color. Like me, he lacked the reflective pelt of the rest of the citizens and he had a horn. His, however, was a short spiral the same color as his coat. Mine was smooth and curved like a giant, bright red, upside-down fang. As the pair swooped closer, I could hear the flyer talking to the pony in her grasp.

“There he is! Shiny, hold him here while I get the Crystal Heart ready. Be safe,” the pink one said. Her horn glowed as she nuzzled the blue and white unicorn, and I could almost see her power seep into her passenger. And then she tossed him to the ground. Just, like, just dropped him from midair.

Hail to the King

'*That one's name is Shiny. The adventure begins!*' I thought excitedly. Finally, this dream can get back on track. Everything had been getting way out of hand lately. The unicorn she had dropped ignited his horn and encased himself in a pink aura. Right before he hit the ground, he slowed his decent to a safe landing. Apparently you could use telekinesis on yourself.

"That's a pretty neat trick, actually," I admired and began walking up to him. Could I do something like that too? Maybe I don't need to be jealous about wings. "Hello, you're Shiny, right? My name is-" I began, but he blasted me in the face with a laser before I could introduce myself. Apparently unicorns can shoot lasers too. His beam didn't have any effect beyond an impromptu light show, but it was the thought that counts.

"What was that for?" I asked, rubbing my nose. I wondered if that was a warning shot or if it was actually supposed to hurt.

"Sombra!" he snarled, confirming that he too was part of the craziness that overtook this town. "You dare to show your face around here."

"There's that name again," I mumbled. Maybe this guy could tell me what's going on? "Listen, uh, Shiny, I have a lot of questions I need answered."

"My name is Shining Armor." He stomped the ground. I couldn't really read pony body language, but it's pretty obvious when someone's itching for a fight no matter what species he is. "You don't deserve to speak, not after all the pain you've inflicted. I am the captain of Celestia's royal guard and prince of the Crystal Empire. You stand upon a liberated nation, tyrant, and the crystal ponies are under my protection." His horn ignited so brightly that I had to squint my eyes. "We beat you once and we can do it again. Bring it on, monster!"

I blinked owlishly. Tyrant? Monster?

"I'm… the bad guy?" I asked. Is that the plot of this dream? But I never imagine myself as the villain. If anything, I should be in this guy's place. He's obviously the hero. We even had opposite color schemes; he's blue and white, while I'm red and black. Shining Armor – as in, 'knight in shining armor' – must be my equal and opposite. I was clearly supposed to fight him.

"Yes you are the bad guy!" Shining Armor spat. "Are you so self-entitled that you can't even see the suffering you've caused?"

He gestured to the buildings that had been peppered with my shards. I could hear the wails of innocent civilians as they braved the streets to flee to safety. It all sank in and it horrified me.

No. I wasn't doing this. This dream was going way too far, and I let myself get railroaded long enough. Even if the game was all laid out for me to follow, it was still my choice whether or not to play.

I did not want to be the villain.

With that decided, I made a big show of laying down on the ground, hooves visible with placating gestures, and without any glow to my horn. “Let’s talk.”

“...Talk,” he growled. “You of all ponies want to talk.” I was hoping that he was one of those people who don’t like to throw the first punch, but I could tell he was chomping at the bit to beat the crap out of me, a phrase that takes on a whole new meaning in a world full of horses.

“Alright, so, I’m guessing there’s a bit of bad blood between us.”

“Bad blood,” Shining Armor forced his words through hatefully clenched teeth. “What you and I have is so much worse than ‘bad blood.’”

“Oh! So we know each other. Great,” I smiled. As long as we were talking, things didn’t have to escalate any further. “Finally, some context. Can you fill me in on what’s going on here? Maybe tell me why everyone was so, you know,” I circled a hoof searchingly, “skittish?”

“Skittish!? You... th-the gall! You can’t even acknowledge your own crimes.”

“Work with me here. I’m totally lost. What are these crimes you’re talking about? When did I do anything to you?” I asked.

“When!?” Shining Armor hissed. “When you crippled my horn with your dark magic. When you made my wife strain herself half to death. When you trapped my little sister in her worst nightmare. Does that ring a bell?! How about when you tried to subjugate an entire race of ponies beneath your hoof! That’s bucking when!” I could see murderous intent on his face. He had this intense, unblinking stare that people get when they really, really wanted to kill something. Those hate-focused eyes pierced me to my very soul, daring me to have the audacity to respond.

Oh dear. Why would my mind whip up this kind of backstory? His own accusations did an incredible job of ticking him off and every word out of my mouth just made it worse. Jesus, he’s got every reason in the world to want my head.

“So, uh, that’s... let’s just... umm,” I scratched the back of my head awkwardly. What could I possibly do to salvage this? “Water under the bridge?” I offered.

What an unfathomably stupid thing to say.

Shining Armor’s eye twitched. For a few hopeful seconds there was peace, but it was merely the calm before the storm. The unicorn before me tensed his whole body and began to shake with passionate, unadulterated hate. I could see spittle gather on his lips past his grinding teeth, and his eyeballs pulsed from increased blood flow. I swear I could see every vein on his face.

Gone was the noble protector of his shimmering empire, and in his place was a berserker driven by righteous fury.

Hail to the King

"GrrrAAAAAAAAAAAHH!" he roared, blasting a laser at me the diameter of my armspan. I yelped and dove out of the way. He missed, but it was by the skin of my teeth. He fired again and again without wasting a single moment on pathetic concepts like mercy or self-control. I, fueled by raw self-preservation instincts, managed to make one of my black crystals burst out of the ground to take the hit. The thing shattered instantly.

More dodging followed, and more lasers followed. From that point on was a constant salvo of pink beams with me alternatingly sprinting for my life and creating crystal spires for cover. He chased me down the street with the single-minded bloodlust of a rabid dog, if you gave that rabid dog a machine gun.

"Calm down! For god's sake, calm down! Mercy! Uncle! Just don't shoot!"

"Sombra, you're a dead pony!" he threatened, punctuating with another horn beam. We were now scrambling down the road like wild animals. To avoid his shots I had to tuck and roll, serpentine, and even jump over a few errant blasts. I'd say it's a miracle I didn't get hit, but more likely it was because he was so blinded by his uncontrollable rage that he couldn't shoot accurately.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" I pleaded. "I seriously can't remember any of that stuff you said I did."

"A shot to the head might help! Hold still!" the enraged unicorn bellowed, to which I screamed like a little girl and ran for my pitiful life.

Princess Cadence landed in the town square. A few brave souls were already present, knowing that they would be needed to power the Crystal Heart, but a majority of them were understandably cowering indoors. It hurt her to ask them to put themselves in harm's way, but there was no other way to stop King Sombra's advance. The Crystal Heart must be ignited, and only they could do it.

Taking a page from Luna's playbook, Princess Cadence broke out the royal Canterlot voice.

"My little ponies, gather to me at once! King Sombra threatens the Empire once again and we need your strength! Remember that it was our love for one another that banished him from our lands, and it is that same love which will be our salvation once more!"

It started slowly with a few ponies poking their heads out their doorways. At Cadence's encouragement they dashed towards the center of town. Hesitant and afraid, they rushed the distance between their homes and the princess as if there was a downpour between them. Her proclamation reached the whole city, and over time those hindered by nervousness or distance began steadily gathering around her.

Her very presence inspired confidence in her subjects. For each one that joined her in the town square, the Crystal Heart grew stronger.

"That's right, everyone together now. Show this evil king that our people stand unbroken, that this beautiful nation is no longer his, and that you will never again be his slaves. Look to one another for support. And prove that no darkness can extinguish the light in our hearts!"

More of the ponies trickled in from their hiding places. Their courage brought a smile to Cadence's face, but she couldn't rest easy knowing that Shining Armor was still out there by himself.

King Sombra is as cruel and cunning as he is powerful. In his last assault on the Empire, he appeared as a black miasma so vast he encircled the whole city. Sombra was an absolute master of dark magic; a being wholly dedicated to bringing pain and suffering to others.

Cadence lowered her head in guilt at the thought of sending her husband alone against such a monster, but she knew that Sombra needed to be stalled. There was no other choice, and this was not the time to second guess herself. She could only hope that her husband could get out of this unscathed.

"Oh, Shiny, please be safe."

I had a good head start down an alleyway, so I seized the opportunity to block it with a wall of crystal, and in a moment the entrance was completely filled. It was higher than anyone could jump and thicker than my body was long. "Yes!" I hopped up and down in excited relief after seeing how strong my impromptu blockade was. It should force him to find another route and buy me a few precious seconds. With any luck, I could lose him in the meantime.

Thrilled at my apparent escape, I almost didn't notice the cracking noises coming from my black wall.

"Huh?"

The entire darn alley quaked. With no warning at all, it went from quietly still to violently shaking. It was so intense that I almost lost my footing despite being on four legs. Fissures appeared in my crystal barrier, each leaking a bright pink light and a high-pitched whine. The wall held for only a few moments before exploding brilliantly.

"SOOOOMMBRAAAAAAAA!" a battlecry split the air, revealing Shining Armor breathing heavily with his mane wildly disheveled. Facing barely any resistance, the unicorn annihilated my wall as if it were a sandcastle. I doubt it cost him a single stride while he easily Kool-Aid-Manned his way through my barricade. The white unicorn's eyes were two fireballs of blazing magic, each promising me an imminent and painful death.

Hail to the King

"I'm doomed," I squeaked.

He turned my way, neck popping loudly, and snarled at me the way the Stalin did to those people he sent to the gulag. "There you are..." he growled. That voice had no business coming from something that wasn't a vengeful god.

"Heh," he grinned. With loud, deliberate hoofsteps he slowly advanced upon me. "You know, I didn't think I'd look forward to this. I didn't think I was a violent pony. But just between you and me; once you're dead I'm going to laugh all night and into the morning. You hurt my wife, my family, and my subjects. Sombra, I can tell you without boasting that I am one of the most powerful unicorns alive. If anypony's going to give you the proper beatdown you deserve, it's going to be me."

I paused for a moment, really letting that all sink in, and once my mind finished rebooting I had only one response to give.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!" I wailed, turning tail and running out of the alleyway. Totally unabashed about my own cowardice, I bolted out of there as fast as my legs could carry me.

I turned the corner just in time to avoid a devastating blast from Shining Armor. His roar – his horrible, explosive roar – signified the chase beginning anew. We had lost ourselves, respectively, to rage and fear. The only words between us now were unintelligible, undignified, animalistic screams. I will shamelessly admit that I was louder than he was.

I had said earlier that ponies were fast, and this body I inhabited was no exception. To escape my equine angel of death, I was galloping at speeds that could challenge Secretariat. Desperation is one heck of a motivator, so I zoomed through the streets as a dark grey bullet. Buildings, alleys, and roads were all a blur as I dashed for sanctuary, somehow managing not to crash despite my life flashing before my eyes.

But it wasn't enough. No matter how fast I ran Shining Armor was right behind me.

"Sombra!" my pursuer yelled and bared his teeth in predatory anticipation. "There is no escape, Sombra! I'm going to get you. I'm. Gonna. GET. YOU!"

He sounded so much closer now. All I could do was whimper pitifully and try to speed up.

"I just hope he's alright," Cadence prayed.

She had a sizable gathering of her subjects by now, some jumping at the call of their leader while others approached reluctantly, wanting nothing more than to hide in their homes. All, however, recognized that there was no other option to combat their evil tormenter.

She had been shouting encouragements nonstop since she landed so that no one would be discouraged when it was time to unleash the Crystal Heart. Luckily, their absolute confidence in their princess had kept anyone from despairing; they were nervous, certainly, but confident. She had defeated Sombra once and she'd do it again, or so they hoped.

"Is everypony prepared?" she asked. "I want all of you behind me. When Shining Armor leads Sombra into the city square, it should be from this direction. Nopony stays out in the open in case I need to shield us."

Everyone shuffled into place as she directed. Many soft whimpers were heard as those in the front lines struggled to get further back where it was safer. They weren't cowards, not by a longshot. In her eyes, everyone present was braver than she could have possibly asked for. She could only hope that their courage would hold long enough for their plan to work. Sombra would be here any minute now.

"There they are!" one of her subjects announced with alarm. Then, after a moment, he continued much more excitedly. "It's Shining Armor! He's... he's got him on the run!"

Sure enough, Cadence could see her husband actually chasing King Sombra down one of the main streets, not the other way around like she expected. Cheers and relieved laughter passed over the crowd. Shiny was already something of an idol in their city, but seeing their champion like this was like learning that heroes really do exist.

"Thank goodness." Cadence let out a breath in relief that she didn't know she was holding. Then, seamlessly snapping back into her leadership role, she issued her command. "Everypony get ready now!"

The crystal ponies were more excited than ever after seeing Shining Armor pursue their foe. That meant that there will be no problems blasting him with the Heart. King Sombra was doomed.

The road we were on led to the center of town. It had no alleyways to provide me with an escape route or any objects I could use to slow him down. I had only two allies: running and cover, both of which I could only take advantage of when there were lots of twists and protective walls. I'd be a sitting duck if we made it to the town square since Shining Armor had a distinct advantage in open spaces. He could shoot lasers and I couldn't; life was so unfair.

"You can't run forever, Sombra. How long do you think you can avoid justice?"

Oh crap. This is it, isn't it? Heading into the open square would be about as safe as walking into a meat grinder, but holding my ground would mean I'd have to fight him one on one. Neither option was particularly survivable, but challenging him in the narrower street was slightly less of a guaranteed demise.

Hail to the King

Alright, dream, fine. You win; I'll fight this guy.

I skidded to a stop, sliding into a turn, and set up a few crystals to block the inevitable shots. The movements in this body were surprisingly natural, making me wonder if I inherited some kind genetic memory to control my new form. The dust cleared and the two of us stood ready to fight mano-a-mano. Or whatever the Spanish word for hoof was.

I took one look and instantly regretted my decision.

"So you finally decided to stand and fight?" he asked. My god, he was actually grinning. "Good. It's about time I showed you the might of Celestia's royal guard. We are the best trained, most powerful, most experienced soldiers in Equestria. We are the elite of the elite and I am their captain."

His horn burned. Its aura was an enormous flickering torch of arcane power. The fact that it was pink did absolutely nothing to make it less intimidating. Actually, it made it worse by adding a pinch of indignity to my imminent beatdown. Shining Armor looked like his head was on fire. Even after a whole town's worth of chasing and a relentless barrage of magic beams, he wasn't even slightly tired. The white unicorn before me was willing, able, and eager to destroy me in every conceivable manner.

Oh god, what could I do? He was like a four-legged Terminator with even less empathy. What could I possibly do to fight him? "Yeah, well, I can make rocks and chuck them with my mind. I'll throw rocks at you!"

How does death work in comas? Do you just, like, start the dream over? I hoped so because I did not want those words to be my epitaph.

Not one to make idle threats, I conjured a particularly big crystal and hurled it at him. "HrrrrrUGH!" I was actually pretty satisfied with the size of that one, especially since it was so spur of the moment. Real big, nice and weighty: the kind of thing any catapult would be proud to launch.

"Take this!" Shouting, the white unicorn unleashed a wall of force. The space before him was instantly filled with a curtain of transparent pink magic. My projectile didn't do a darn thing, just smacking into his barrier and dropping to the ground. Then, without warning, he shot his spell outward. No beams this time: just one mighty shove and he propelled me backwards a considerable distance. I had no chance of dodging it, since that thing encompassed the whole street as it steamrolled down the road, making me cartwheel wildly.

"And stay down!"

I couldn't even see straight when the second blast hit me. Repurposing his talent for making force fields, Shining Armor snowplowed me down the street again and again with an unavoidable wall of solid magic. It wasn't a fair fight. Heck, most people wouldn't call it a fight at all. It was just one guy shoving someone away like a bouncer dealing with a drunk.

Bowling in a series of rough flips I landed smack dab in the 'I am so boned' area of the unprotected open square.

Well, that was anticlimactic. So much for my first real wizard duel. A fight can only be so one-sided before it starts being an execution. I should consider myself lucky I wasn't a fine paste by now.

The clack of hooves against stone reminded me that Shining Armor was still there and still fully able to beat me like a drum.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," he said, having no idea how hard he was preaching to the choir. "I'd drag this out longer, but I'm not willing to put my city at risk just to vent my frustrations." Shining Armor looked over my shoulder and started chuckling. "Besides, dictator, it seems you've already lost." Grinning victoriously, he pointed behind me. "I've been herding you into the middle of the city this whole time. After all that running, all you've done is given my wife the chance to get the Crystal Heart ready. Take a look. We've got you now, Sombra."

I looked where he pointed and saw that the pink one was there and she wasn't alone. Behind the pony princess were hundreds of her subjects. It was as if the whole city was behind her, forming a semicircle so everyone was looking straight at me. She had a big, blue, shiny rock with her that was carved into the shape of a heart – basically the opposite of the crystals I keep making.

What's the crystal for? Is it some kind of bomb or other magical weapon? Are they going to seal me inside it? The laser beams that Shiny fired at me were scary enough, but I wasn't expecting things to escalate this far. Whatever trap they had laid, I was having no part of it. It was time to bail so I turned around and bolted.

"Nope! You win. I quit." I took off at full sprint, kicking up some dust from my powerful start, but I only managed a few steps before something hoisted me into the air.

"Not so fast, Sombra," said Shining Armor. He telekinetically lifted me into the air and used his force fields to encase me in a pink bubble. A few experimental whacks told me there was no way I'd break out of that thing.

Looking past Shining Armor I could see the princess pony and her subjects performing some kind of ritual. All of them were all bowing to their blue heart-shaped crystal, which was now pulsating erratically. "This is the end, monster. When we're all dancing on your grave I'll make sure the music is tasteful."

"You're all crazy! Let me go!" I desperately banged on my spherical prison with a hoof. "Look, this is all a mistake. I'm not King Sombra. I'm not King Sombra!"

"Cadence, do it now!" Shining Armor yelled. At his order, that heart-shaped crystal flared in a bright, pale blue light.

Hail to the King

"Wait. Hold on! Wait, wait, wait! We can talk this over!" I tried to reason with them, but it was too late.

The power of the Crystal Heart blew over me like a strong wind. It felt friendly, if that makes any sense. The moment it hit me I felt happier and more relaxed. The rush of uplifting emotions was nothing compared to what I felt in my near-death experience, but I couldn't help but find some similarities. You know that feeling you get when something melts your stress away, like a good massage or meeting an important deadline? It was like that, but so much stronger. Stress that had been building since I woke up, the ache of my muscles from the chase through the city, and the fear of watching an entire town aim their super-weapon at me was gone in a flash. It was amazing.

In mere moments it was all over. The surge passed over me and I was none worse for the wear. In fact, I felt better than ever. The physical and mental soothing granted to me by the Crystal Heart left me almost giddy.

"Wow. That wasn't bad at all." I guess that Heart of theirs wasn't a weapon. But if they weren't attacking, then maybe this all was just a huge misunderstanding on my part. I was going to have to have a talk with those two ponies in charge to sort everything out. This begs the question, however; what were they doing? I glanced around smiling, wondering which one of the ponies would tell me what I needed to know. There's a whole crowd here, so someone must know something.

Their looks of unimaginable horror was something I never wanted to see again. The crystal ponies had a shell-shocked expression about them, as if their worst nightmares were coming true right before their eyes. Some of started tearing up and many embraced each other fearfully, not knowing what else to do.

"N-no way," Shining Armor whispered. "That's impossible. It couldn't have failed." Even though I was securely within his force field, Shining Armor couldn't help but back away from me. This was the same guy who tore after me like a bear no more than a minute ago. The pink bubble around me started to falter, but it was immediately reinforced by a blue one. Standing at his side the princess laid a comforting hoof on his back, and Shining Armor immediately composed himself. They seemed to draw strength from one another.

"Everypony stay calm! We can try again, but we have to be positive or else the Crystal Heart won't work!" The pink one, whom I am guessing is their leader, ordered the crowd, not that it did her any good. I could already see the assembled ponies shuffling backwards and getting ready to sprint away. The inevitable whispers grew louder and widespread. Murmurings like "we can't stop him," "there's no hope," "the dark times are back," and other doomsaying passed through the crowd, circling in an alarmist feedback loop until the whole town was one harsh din.

“We can still do this!” the blue and white unicorn piped up to support their leader. His voice, unfortunately, was just barely audible over the terrified city’s cries. “Everypony stay strong! Stay together!”

“The Crystal Heart failed. We have to get out of here!” someone shouted. I was pretty sure a stampede was about to start. To prevent things from getting out of hand someone had to stop the panic, but I was getting swept up in the confusion too.

“What’s going on? What was that thing with the heart? Please, everyone stop shouting!” I pleaded as loud as I could, but I might have well whispered for all the effect it had. The two ponies in charge didn’t have much success either.

“Cadence, I’m going to stay here and keep the shield up,” Shining Armor said to the princess, never taking his eyes off of me. “You need to evacuate the city. Get everypony into the palace as quickly as possible. Take the Heart with you.”

“Shiny, we have to stop him here. Running won’t do us any good. It’s now or never.”

As I saw one of the citizens in the crowd start to hyperventilate, I decided enough was enough and I’d had it with all this weirdness. “Alright, horn, don’t screw me over again,” I muttered, charging up my magic. Once again an evil-looking aura consumed my horn, glowing brightly as I took a deep breath.

“SILENCE!” I shouted. Magic amplified my gravelly voice to a cacophonous boom and caused the force field to pulse like a subwoofer. It didn’t break, but the unicorns making it flinched as if struck. “Whoops. Uh, sorry guys.”

Suppressing a sigh of relief, I could see that my shout stopped the crowd in its tracks. Even the regal looking couple gave me their full attention. Granted, it was less of a diplomatic kind of attention and more the type that duelists give each other, but no one was going into hysterics so I considered it an improvement. They were all frozen in place, just waiting for someone to make the first move. Knowing that the peace wouldn’t last long I loudly cleared my throat while I still had the chance.

“Listen! Listen up, all of you!” I demanded. “Before any of you start screaming again, before those two try to attack me, or the rest of you run away,” I passed a hoof across the crowd, individually pointing out the two in charge and some of the more frightened looking ponies,

The crowd got ready to bolt, each one tensing the muscles in their legs to dash off if I make a single move. The force fields around me got more opaque as the leader ponies reinforced their shields as much as possible. This place was a powder keg, but they managed to control themselves long enough to hear what I had to say. “I’ve got just one question for you. Just one,” I said, and the whole city waited on baited breath.

“Who the heck is King Sombra!?”

Hail to the King

The following seconds passed undisturbed. The two in charge looked at me, glanced at each other, and then stared back at me with trepidation and incredulity. Everyone else shut their mouths. You could hear a pin drop.

"Well? ...Anyone?"

CHAPTER
TWO

AN UNSTABLE MIND

"Okay, I get that I may have caused a bit of a scene back there, but is all this really necessary?" I asked from inside of a prison cell, which was covered by Shining Armor's force field, reinforced by Cadence's own force field, and surrounded by more than a dozen guards, all of which was in the deepest, innermost room of the Crystal Empire's palace. It was essentially a bunker turned inside-out. Credit where it's due: they weren't taking any chances.

"And can you loosen the shock collar? It's a little tight. I can live with the manacles, but the straight jacket is kind of itchy," I asked, or at least tried to. It was kind of hard to talk through the muzzle.

Shining Armor did his ample best to ignore every word I said, and instead addressed a team of ponies working on my cell. From the sound of things, they were trying to add even more layers to the matryoshka doll of my incarceration. I would have asked how they managed to trawl up a construction crew from the cowardly lot from before, but I was too busy wondering how my front legs were flexible enough to be tied behind my back and handcuffed.

"How many more locks can we weld to the door?" he barked, peering over everyone's shoulders to check their progress. "Please tell me we're done fortifying the walls. I want this cell to be the most indestructible location in all of Equestria."

"We're working as fast as we can, your majesty."

Loud, metallic sounds of construction blared from outside my jail, but there was only a tiny food slot for me to watch what was going on. From what little I could see, the whole cell was being refurbished to paranoid extremes. Thick, heavy, metal bars close enough to be touching each other formed a palisade in front of the already hard prison wall. Diagonal supporting beams sealed into the floor were attached for an extra layer of protection. My door was replaced for security reasons. It had that bank vault style wheel used to open it; the kind you'd see on submarines. Most panic rooms weren't this well-defended. They even brought in a mason to mortar a redundant façade of tough bricks to the front of it all, leaving me somewhat worried that they'd get all *Cask of Amontillado* on me.

The captain of the guard had calmed down quite a bit in the last hour or so. The presence of the pink pony, whose name was Cadence, seemed to do wonders for his psyche. After sending an urgent message to someone named Celestial, he had been impatiently trotting back and forth in front of my door. The unicorn was no longer one scream away from having an aneurism, and best of all he had stopped giving me death threats.

Hail to the King

From inside my prison-turducken I tried to negotiate with the two in charge. "Listen, guys. Today has just been a long series of easily preventable accidents and misunderstandings. Can we start over? Let's take this whole afternoon and just, you know, mulligan."

Shining Armor stopped his pacing to peer straight through the food slot. "Accidents?" He was so aghast that he almost had to laugh about it. "You **accidently** assaulted a nation's capital? Really? Since when do artillery strikes happen by mistake?"

"I was just trying to help," I answered, making Shiny's vein throb slightly. "I mean, I made this big wall, and the ponies were afraid of the wall, so I thought I'd make it disappear, but instead it exploded. It happens, apparently. Then, well, you know the rest, and here we are."

He regarded me with cold, disbelieving eyes, manifestly preventing himself from lashing out. "Well, I'm so glad to hear that you had the best of intentions at heart. Do you lay siege to all the places you visit?" he sneered in the most artificially calm voice I'd ever heard.

"In my defense, she stopped most of it," I nodded to Cadence. "And hey, you spent that whole chase shooting away like a redneck. I'll bet half the damage to the city was your fault." Grinning beneath the muzzle, I tilted my nose up smugly. "So yeah, who should be in jail now, huh?"

Shining Armor stopped breathing for, like, ten seconds.

"… I am going to kill him," he whispered. "Another minute of this and I'm going to do something I'll regret." He shook his head rapidly to force the bad thoughts away. "Cadence, you take over from here. I'm going to check on the work crew."

Were we nemeses? He did list a lot of personal grievances before he shot at me, but I really hoped this wasn't the case. He was a royal guard who could run on four legs; that was like being a police officer and a cop dog at the same time. How was I supposed to get on his good side? Offer him a doughnut, I guessed.

As Shining Armor stomped off to lower his blood pressure, Cadence sat down to keep watch on the door. Up until now she had kept her distance, intransigently refusing to give me the time of day. I tried to break the ice, but the way she turned her head when I cleared my throat told me she wouldn't have listened anyway.

And worst of all, they still hadn't told me who this King Sombra fellow was.

I've had power fantasies in my dreams before; to be the president, or a superhero, or filthy rich, et cetera. The scenarios were always pure wish-fulfillment cut from whole cloth. No explanations were needed or given. I just built a role and enjoyed myself until the alarm clock blared. This, however, was something else. Somehow this dream came with a full backstory and tangible consequences for my own actions. I wasn't building a role, I was playing one. Apparently I was a king, a powerful sorcerer, and,

more disturbingly, a hated villain. That was as much as I could gather because they adamantly refused to answer my questions.

But how could I play my part – or subvert it, as I had planned– if I didn't have access to any context?

"So it's 'King' Sombra, right? What am I the king of, exactly?"

"Nopony answer that," Cadence ordered her subordinates. "Don't listen to anything he says." In an odd, but perhaps inevitable quirk of linguistics, they replaced every instance of 'man' with 'pony' and any reference to hands with hooves. Jeez, that was going to get awkward and annoying really fast; I hoped I was never in a situation where I had to call for a handyman.

I groaned disappointedly at her refusal. Today had been freaking awful. "Just give me the common knowledge stuff. I don't need a whole detailed summary. Come on, fill in the blanks here!"

Cadence continued her silence, and not just an incidental silence like she just didn't feel like talking. The pony maintained eye contact the whole time and refused to give any reaction. She was being quiet at me, as if hushing up could be an aggressive response.

That was how she wanted to play it, huh? No, I wasn't taking this lying down. She needed to get off her high horse. This was my dream and I was gonna seize it by is miserable throat.

"Hey!" I yelled unnecessarily loud. Said high horse twitched her ear from the noise. "I asked you a question and it's rude not to respond. Speak up, pony-girl, I'm talking to you." I shuffled as close as I could to the door and began pounding on its metal surface, much to her annoyance. Good, pushing this further might give me a reaction. Because my hands – hooves – were immobilized in a way that would make Hannibal Lecter sympathetic, I had to flop on the ground and bash away with mule kicks. "Helloooo." Bang. Bang. "I know you can hear me. Yes you, the flamboyant one with the dyed hair." Bang. Bang. "You ain't a bystander no more! Talk to me." Bang! "This ain't gonna stop!" Bang. Bang. BANG!

The pink princess took a very deep breath and let it out slowly. "Shiny, could you be a dear and cast a ward directly on the door?"

A smiling white unicorn appeared from the side of my viewing portal. He was uncomfortably close enough to make me stop my assault. "My pleasure."

His horn glowed and then the door glowed with it. I backed away before whatever voodoo mumbo-jumbo he did could affect me. After a brief moment, the magic suddenly stopped to seemingly no effect. What did he do to the cell? It didn't seem any different from normal, and looking it up and down revealed nothing strange or new about it. What was a ward and what did it do?

I leaned close to the door to check for weirdness then lightly tapped it with my crown.

Hail to the King

BZZZAP!

“Gah!” the door shocked my head through the crown. It was harmless and felt more like static electricity than an electric fence, but the surprise made me jump back. Unfortunately, jumping back meant toppling gracelessly to the floor because I had no front limbs to catch myself.

Alright, there was a difference between not being helpful and actively trying to keep me in the dark. What was her problem?

“Look, are you going to make me piece this together myself? I’ll help clean up the city if you want. Will you give me a hint? Maybe tell me if I’m hot or cold.”

“That muzzle was absolutely useless,” Cadence groaned as she massaged her temples.

I took that as a no. Seeing that she was going to be no help, I gazed contemplatively to the ceiling and tried to make connections.

So I was a king, whose name was Sombra, and I was a wizard. A pony wizard. And these guys did not like me one bit. That meant my ‘Sombra’ persona was infamous in this community before I showed up to take the reins, so to speak. Now, what business did an evil, sorcerous overlord have in a town of exaggeratedly innocent little horses?

Right. Bad stuff. I imagined my reputation with these ponies was similar to Dr. Doom.

What else was there? Most of this was baseless guessing and conjecture, but if this mad carnival of a dream followed the normal tropes, then I saw two options. First, I was the classic, evil emperor; this was my kingdom and someone, possibly a long lost son, overthrew me to set everyone free. And in the second option, I and my army of dark minions descended upon this city and tried to level it like the Vandals did to Rome.

That or these ponies just really, really frigging hated outsiders. Impossible, though, since my treatment seemed too personal and everyone knew my assigned name.

Cadence definitely ruled this place, since pretty much all of the ponies bowed to her. Also, she ordered everyone to ignore anything I said, as if she knew something about me they didn’t. Not personally, meaning me, but she seemed to know Sombra’s identity pretty well. I wondered how deep that relationship went.

Hold on a second. If I was a king and she was a princess, then… hmm.

“Are you my daughter?”

Cadence jolted back like I punched her in the gut. She actually stumbled for a moment and had to sit down. “Are you serious? No!” She looked a little bit ill. To illustrate her point, she inched further back to put more distance between us. “How could you even think that?”

I gave her an apologetic look. “I was just wondering what our relationship was.”

“We are nothing!” she snapped indignantly. “Everypony’s lives would be better if we never knew you.”

Yikes, she was really shaken up. That was awfully mean of her, but I got the information I needed. If I wasn’t the father of the princess, then I couldn’t be the king. Sombra could only have been the ruler of an invading country, one who was especially brutal if their vitriol was any indication. That complicated matters quite a bit. I didn’t see how I was going to get out of this prison, especially now that Cadence thought I was a huge creeper.

“Hey, I don’t know who I am either. The truth is that all these ‘you are evil’ accusations are totally blindsiding me. I’ve got no idea what’s going on,” I shrugged. Or not really shrugged, per say. I couldn’t do it on all fours let alone in this strait jacket they saddled me with, so I rolled my shoulders questioningly.

Things were getting way out of hand, so I had to at least try to mend fences with these ponies, and probably buildings too if they gave me community service. “So yea or nay on starting over with a clean slate?”

“Nay,” the pony responded instantly. Shoot.

Thankfully, the princess had softened from simmering irritation to cautious confusion. She still held me in lower esteem than mosquitoes, but at this point if she asked me ‘what the heck is wrong with you?’ it would be an actual question instead of a rhetorical insult. I didn’t know how she expected me to act, but I could guarantee that I did not fit the bill.

“How can you be so flippant about this? You are wholly unapologetic, but you think we will let you go. You have already tried to destroy the city, but you say you mean no harm. What happened to you?”

“Nothing,” I insisted. “And I didn’t try to blow up the city. I made it hail a bit by accident, that’s all.” Hail, in this case, referred to the beachball-sized shards of solid, crystalized dark magic that shelled a residential sector apropos of nothing. I might have been understating things slightly. “Not to point fingers, but I could have explained everything if Javert here wasn’t trying run me down.” I nodded towards her white companion.

Cadence looked at me funny. It occurred to me that even if these ponies were the creations of my own mind, they would probably stay ‘in character’ and play dumb about the references I used. And due to the throaty growls of my voice, whenever I made an allusion all they must’ve heard was just deep, meaningless demon-garble, like a Furby that was running low on batteries.

“Um, Shiny, can you come here for a moment?”

"Just a second," he said from where he had been casting his magic nonstop on the walls of my cell. "I'm on my seventh defensive spell and I want to make it an even ten."

"Now, hon." She used that voice that the unmarried have not yet learned to dread. With obvious hesitation, Shining Armor dropped what he was doing and trotted over to his wife, no questions asked.

Cadence's horn glowed, and the two of them were surrounded by a transparent dome of her magic. Those force fields were really nifty. I wondered when I would be able to use them.

Inside her dome of silence, the two could speak candidly. Cadence, who had grown increasingly troubled as the day stretched on, dubiously glanced back and forth between her husband and her prisoner.

"It seems King Sombra is not entirely himself."

"That's an understatement," he nodded. "It's like his whole personality has flipped around. And thank Celestia for that. If the Crystal Heart really doesn't have any effect, then I have no idea how we could stop him again."

Cadence sighed. "I'm just worried that he's faking it. That pony is corruption incarnate. I wouldn't put anything past him."

Humming in somber agreement, Shining Armor had to acknowledge that things hadn't gone as planned. "I'm worried too. Now, I don't trust him any further than I could throw him, but there's got to be more to this; I don't see how playing the fool could benefit him. And from what little Celestia knew, Sombra should be too proud to use these kinds of tactics. There's definitely something going on here."

Despite knowing how impressively far her husband could throw a pony, she knew they were on the same page. "What could have happened? You've heard some of the things he has said. None of it makes any sense."

Nothing about their guest matched up with their past experiences. He was oddly cooperative, surprisingly chatty, and when they escorted him to the dungeon, he waved to the crowd like he was riding a parade float.

"It's... possible that maybe, and this is a very big maybe, he really has forgotten who he is," Shiny reluctantly admitted. "But only because the Sombra I know would've crushed us the instant he saw that the Crystal Heart failed."

"That's what confuses me. If this is the pony we know, then yes, he would have pressed his advantage. But if he truly knew nothing of the Empire, then why did he bombard us? That it was all an accident is simply too unbelievable. Something of Sombra must remain within him. Otherwise, he never would have caused an incident and certainly wouldn't have provoked you into fighting him."

The captain averted his eyes but didn't correct her. He knew that he overreacted earlier, but the lion's share of the blame still lay with the dark pony.

His wife continued, confusion giving way to frustration, or maybe it was vice-versa. "He doesn't seem malicious, but if he isn't here to attack us, then why did he appear at all? Maybe he has lost his sense of self, but that could just as easily be what he wants us to think. In the last few hours he has infiltrated the city, terrorized the populace, caused extensive property damage, and is currently housed in his former base of operations. There is a good chance that we are playing right into his hooves."

"Then we have to think one step ahead. What could he possibly want and how do we stop it?" Shiny suggested.

"I know, but how can we predict his actions if he doesn't act like himself at all? King Sombra wasn't like Discord, or Chrysalis, or even Nightmare Moon. He was methodical and efficient, never wasting his time on distractions or underestimating his opponents." Cadence by now was so worked up that she began walking in circles in the perimeter of her dome. "Remember that Twilight was stopped by traps and spells he had laid a thousand years in advance, and I only managed to keep him at bay. We never faced him openly. Is he playing us for fools? Has he truly found a way to subvert the Crystal Heart? I don't trust him. I just can't."

She had half a mind to drag the Crystal Heart right into that cell and blast him repeatedly until it worked.

"I mean, how do you explain that?" she pointed a hoof to their loopy, if remarkably cordial prisoner.

Neither of them could produce an answer.

As they quietly wondered what they should do next, a crystal pony stood outside her dome, hesitantly waving to catch their attention and wondering whether it would be rude to knock on the alicorn's force field. Cadence dispelled her barrier to listen to her subject.

"The reinforcements are done, your majesties," the pony announced. The royal couple could see that their small-scale bulwark was complete. "And we got that thing you requested." He handed a small jewel to her without further comment. Now that their jobs were done, all nonessential personnel trotted out of the dungeon, eager to get away from the evil, evil pony. None of them even waited to be dismissed and only a pair of silent guards remained.

Hail to the King

"What's that?" Shining Armor pointed to his wife's trinket. As far as he could tell, there was nothing remarkable about it. But then again, this was the Crystal Empire and just about any rock shinier than quartz probably had some mystical properties attached to it.

She held it up for him to see. "The palace vaults contained many interesting artifacts, including this simple lie detector. This, apparently, was used by King Sombra to determine which of his subjects were loyal. It is only appropriate that it now be used against him."

The implication was obvious. "You're not thinking of interrogating him, are you?"

Cadence nodded without hesitation. "There are too many unanswered questions here, and now that the workers are gone we'll be able to speak freely. I'll stay here and question him. You need to get out there and keep the city calm. The situation is bad enough already."

"What? No, Cadence, I can't let you go in there alone." Even if Sombra totally chickened out in their latest confrontation, their prisoner was still on par with an alicorn in power and surpassing Discord in cruelty.

But the princess was having none of it. "Someone has to be there for the crystal ponies," she argued. "Just imagine what must be going through their heads right now. I need you to be out there, both for me and for them." She had never seen her husband so uncertain before. "Besides, if worse comes to worst, I've kept him at bay for days at a time. This won't be a problem."

"Let me do the questioning. You should be the one to calm the citizens down."

"I understand, but this is a special case. Ultimately, he was harmed by my magic the last time we faced each other, and I'm sorry to say this, but he overwhelmed you in seconds." She stretched a leg over his neck and hugged him close. "It's okay. I can handle this."

He looked like he had something else to say, but there was simply no denying that the alicorn was better suited to the task. This wasn't just a distraction like before. Whoever questioned the king would have to be in the same room as him with nowhere to run. As his wife held him closer he finally relented. "Fine," he sighed. "Please be careful, Cadence. Who knows what devious plans are forming in his mind?"

I tilted my head back and forth, looking at the thick metal door to my cell. The thing zapped me once, but maybe that was a one-time-only sort of thing. Tentatively, I stretched a hind leg to test it.

"Is this still-"

BZAAP!

"Yup. Yes, it is."

Because I couldn't read lips, I kept myself busy and productive by working out how this magic nonsense functioned. Given that magic and science are antonyms in the dictionary, however, progress was glacial. No data, no experimental plan, and no working hypothesis presented itself; hence the poking. Poking was the primordial origin of the scientific method.

The problem was I couldn't focus on solving anything as long as I had this freaking jacket on, because it was driving me crazy. It was all itchy and constrictive and it had to go. Not much could be accomplished if I didn't have access to my hands – Dang it all: hooves! I meant hooves – so it had to come off right this second.

Alright, how was I supposed to get this thing off of me?

I didn't hear the door open behind me as the princess entered the room. She was determined to get to the bottom of this no matter what. Shiny left to deal with the citizens, leaving her alone with history's greatest monster. There was no telling what she expected to see, but she knew this was history in the making. Would he turn his back to her and refuse to even look at his supposed enemy? Would he be standing in the exact center of the room, staring all creepy-like? Maybe he would attack on sight. Who knew? Cadence gulped nervously, readied her horn, and passed the armored threshold.

The conniving king lay before her, attempting to wiggle out of his restraints like a dog stuffed into a holiday sweater.

Yeah, that was about par for the course.

I was really going to town on that thing too, straining my neck so my pointy crown could rip the fabric. Why they let me keep that thing I'd never know, but it was proving useful. My unique pair of fangs would have been better suited, but my muzzle was still in the way, so crown it was. Despite my efforts, however, the strait jacket was built to last and I couldn't even puncture a hole in it.

"... ahem," Cadence announced herself to no avail.

I wondered if I could just magic it off me. My repertoire consisted of lifting stuff, making rocks, and blowing things to smithereens: skills not typically conducive to the subtle art of escapology. That was all reserved for plan B.

"Sombra."

"...huh?" Oh, I had a guest. "Hi, Cadence."

Annoyed by my informality, she closed the door behind her and got right down to business, not even saying hello. "We have questions. Lots of questions that you are going to answer for us," she began. Her tone was authoritative, but not a single quality about her was intimidating so it was difficult to take her seriously. "And this," she placed a transparent jewel on the floor between us, "is to ensure that you tell me nothing but the truth, and I promise by the time I leave this room, I will get the truth from you."

Again, she was not even slightly menacing.

So this was their idea of an interrogation. If I were in charge, we'd be at opposite sides of a small table with an uncomfortably bright light between us, but whatever. Their castle, their rules. All she brought with her was that fancy jewel and a notepad.

"Before we begin, I need you to introduce yourself. Speak loudly and clearly."

"Sounds good," I responded, leaning down to speak directly to her rock. "Pleased to meet you. I'm King Sombra, or so they tell me."

PING! The little crystal flashed green and chimed like a bell. Cadence nodded and checked off something on her notepad while I continued.

"Given that I don't seem to hold an office, however, I'm going to assume that King is my actual first name."

BZZRT! This time the device flashed red and buzzed in a way that reminded me of old TV game shows. False, huh? Yeah, I kind of figured that would happen. Something about this situation told me that I was a real, honest-to-goodness king somehow. And also the crown. I was wearing an actual crown.

"Don't play games with me," a completely unamused Cadence sternly warned. "First, and most importantly, how did you face the Crystal Heart and come out unscathed? Nopony guilty of your crimes could have withstood its magic."

Instead of answering, I groaned disappointedly. "Eugh, is that actually what it's called? I've just been saying 'crystal heart,' because that's the simplest way I can describe it. Is 'Crystal Heart' seriously its real name? Like, with capitalization and everything?"

"Yes." She was in no mood for this. "Now answer the question."

"I don't know. I didn't even know what that thing was. So, what, you just let a big rock determine who's guilty or innocent? That's what the blue light was?"

Noting the green flash of her jewel, and therefore genuine ignorance on my part, the princess conceded some information for once. "When dark magic threatens the crystal ponies, they call upon its light to rid them of whatever evil lurks in their home. As long as they remain focused and positive, this city is nearly invincible. At least, that is how it is supposed to work." She eyed me in what was either suspicion or disgust, probably both. "I wasn't aware there could be exceptions."

"Yeah, I'm pretty exceptional," I beamed, because apparently if I was going to dig my own grave then I would drill to the Earth's fiery mantle. Cadence, as expected, was quick to shut me down.

"This is no laughing matter! The Crystal Heart is a manifestation of the light and love of all crystal ponies. Hope is brought to fruition and evil is purged entirely. Its judgment is the will of the land itself!"

Raising a single eyebrow, I pondered the implications. "Oh, okay," I nodded. Odd way to run a justice system, but in a colorful land of talking, make-believe, magical horses who was I to judge? "If your Crystal Heart already vouched for me, then I'd like to be acquitted on account of double jeopardy. Where's the exit?"

She nearly facepalmed with her hoof. It wasn't an exasperated smack or anything, but in her frustration she did rub her forehead to coax a headache into submission.

"I... genuinely can't tell if you are being sarcastic," she said, though the green gem on the table verified my statements. "And sit down!" she shouted, since I was, in fact, heading for the exit.

What? She just said that their Crystal Heart determines guilt, and I obviously wasn't 'purged entirely.' That meant I was exonerated. There should be no problem here. But fine, since she wanted her way so badly, I played along to not worsen this already disastrous situation. I sat back down on the floor across from her and waited for the next round of questions.

"We never expected to see you again, Sombra. What do you want?"

"For now? Same as anyone sent to jail: a quick discharge and an insincere apology."

Cadence finally sat down, recognizing that this was going to be a long one.

"How could you possibly expect that? You're going to prison no matter what. I don't care if you say you don't know who you are, because even if you weren't King Sombra there is no denying that you assaulted a whole city no more than a few hours ago."

"Part of a city," I mumbled, as if that made a lick of difference. "Look, I said it was an accident, and I'm willing to help fix it. Why don't you believe me?"

For the tiniest moment, she looked torn. But just as quickly it was gone and replaced by her usual suspicious demeanor. Why did she hesitate like that?

"Because no one changes that quickly. The Sombra I knew was bent on dominating all that is just! Don't try to play innocent with me because I know the real you. You are literally a mass of darkness and fear who was burned – actually burned – just by touching my love magic."

Wow. So I was that kind of villain was I? How disappointing. What I inferred from her words was that things like love and darkness were tangible, measurable, objective qualities here. Extrapolating further, she must have expected love to be super-effective against darkness. That meant I was Evil with a capital E, not just evil by someone's opinion.

"Um... I'm turning over a new leaf," I smiled brightly.

PING! The detector confirmed. Cadence's ears straightened upward then drooped back down as if deflating. I had no idea what that body language signified.

"How is this...?" Shaking her head in confusion, she poked the lie detector, tapping it give her the expected result like it was a malfunctioning thermometer. To her dismay it stubbornly stayed a bright green. "Gugh! Did you bash your head on a rock or something!? Nopony can 'turn over a new leaf' after the life you've lived! You're King Sombra! How could you face the Crystal Heart's full power and not be blasted apart!?"

... What did she just say?

"Blast me apart!?" My eyes snapped wide open. I pretty much leaped across the whole room and scrambled to put some space between us. Until this point, I assumed her talk of purging evil was metaphorical, or at the very worst meant I'd be kicked out of the city. "That thing was going to kill me! Oh my god, what's wrong with you! We've known each other for, like, five minutes total and you're already plotting murder!"

Cadence ignited her horn at my sudden movement, but let it go out as what I said registered. "Murder!? I- I would never-" she covered her mouth with a hoof at the scandalous accusation.

"So you knew that thing would kill me and you did it anyway! How is that anything but attempted homicide? You saw me coming, and your first thought was 'I'mma go kill that guy.' Yes or no?"

"No!" she answered quickly and indignantly.

BZZR T! The lie detector buzzed and gave me all the proof I needed.

I gasped loudly. "You're evil!"

Pausing, she blinked several times in rapid succession. "What!? No! *No*!" she sputtered. "You! You are the one that's evil!" The princess advanced on me, pointing an accusatory hoof.

Sliding with my back to the crystalline wall, I scooted to a more distant corner where it was safe. "Well between the two of us, I'm not the one who jumps straight to summary executions. You passed judgment long before you thought to talk to me, I'll bet. Face it; there ain't no justice in that picture that you're painting of me in your mind. Your whole legal system is rigged against me!"

PING! The gem sounded. I'd fist-bump that thing if I could.

"Ya see! It knows I'm telling the truth. Green lights emit, you must acquit!"

As Cadence reeled, I wanted to punctuate my statements with a dramatic slam of the hoof. But, because I forgot I had the jacket on, I just flopped straight to the ground embarrassingly. Immediately sitting back up on my haunches, I pretended like nothing happened.

The princess finally got her bearings in the meantime. “Stop this at once! I have done nothing immoral, in no way are you innocent, and I will not tolerate your baseless accusations! For goodness sake I am the Princess of Love,” she said, as if that title was supposed to mean something to me.

“And what is it you love so much? Is it summary executions?” I accused. She almost certainly kept a full-time headspony on staff. Oh my god, that was probably how she kept herself in power! Princess of Love; more like the Queen of Hearts. Cadence, your streets might be glimmering, but they ran over with blood.

“Don’t you dare accuse me of something like that!” she shouted. “Unlike you, I do not rule by fear.” Using her magic, she hoisted me into the air and planted me firmly on the ground in front of her. Riled and insulted, she put her head right in front of mine to make darn sure I heard everything she had to say. “But you’re right. I wanted you gone because you dared to harm my ponies before, and by all the information we had you would do it again. Given the choice between them and you, I could make that decision in a heartbeat. I protected my subjects from an imminent threat, nothing more. You, of all ponies, have no right to judge others’ actions.”

Okay, I stood corrected. Cadence could be intimidating when she wanted to be. The detector pinged after her tirade, so thankfully that meant she wasn’t evil. Good, because my mind was going to a dark place for a moment there. Bad, because I heard straight from the horse’s mouth that she was, indeed, willing to kill me.

To an outside observer she might have seemed reasonable, but I was ticked off. As far as I was concerned, she was casually disregarding my life for something I had no knowledge of. That I logically knew that none of this was real made no difference. The emotions were genuine.

“That’s a load of crap,” I snapped. “I was stopping the rocks from hitting the city when you showed up. Then, when you set up that shield, you had all the time in the world to talk to me. But no, you sent in your attack dog. I’ve been in this place, this… uh,” I signaled for her to help me out.

“Equestria,” she supplied.

“Equestria for a few minutes before we ran into each other. I have done literally nothing before this afternoon.”

Cadence rolled her eyes.

“You want proof?” I leaned down to the lie detector. “Listen up, Rocky. I have no idea what’s going on, I don’t know what Cadence thinks I did, and I am not evil.”

PING!

"There! Not lying. I already know that whatever role I'm supposed to be playing is evil, but I want no part of it," I insisted. "So let's get down to business. I need to know everything there is to know about me. Who is Sombra and what did he do?"

She seemed troubled. Her own lie detector threw her unimpeachable conviction that I was a malicious evildoer into question. "I can't answer that."

BZZR T!

"Can't or won't." I smirked. It seemed the lie detector was on my side now.

"I can't!" she retorted after a moment. "Because if you have lost your memory, then every word I say could bring you closer to a relapse!"

BZZR T!

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You made that up on the spot, didn't ya?"

"It is no less valid!" she insisted.

"The rock says otherwise. Apparently rocks are the highest authority in the land, so I got you there." I still held on to the belief that their all-powerful Crystal Heart exonerated me. Who was I to question the lithocracy?

"Then it's because...," she strained. "Maybe you've found a way to cause false positives on this gem. Maybe you haven't lost your memory at all!"

BZZR T! It contradicted her again. It was too simple of an explanation anyway. By Cadence's own admission, if I was faking it, and really was evil, then I'd have been eradicated by the Crystal Heart. I was starting to like their stone-based judiciary system. The question of guilt was always crystal clear.

"Jeez, three buzzes in a row. You're really digging a hole for yourself."

"Would you stop this already?!" Cadence pounded a hoof on the floor. "I'm the one asking the questions here!"

BZZR T! The detector sounded. That buzzer was my new best friend.

Cadence's head snapped to the traitorous gem. Seizing the infuriating device in the blue haze of her telekinesis, Cadence chucked it through the food slot where it could do no more damage to her psyche. Goodbye, little buddy.

Wisely choosing to shut my mouth for once, I let Cadence compose herself. She did a strange breathing exercise, extending her foreleg with each exhale, and then patted her mane back onto position.

I was now pretty sure that manes were a good barometer of a pony's state of mind. If it wasn't in place, you'd better run.

"Let's start over," she offered. I nodded back, still not sure if it was safe to talk. The last time I spoke up in this kind of situation it didn't end well for anyone.

But, since I wanted to maintain control of the conversation, I took a chance responding. "Great. So, you were about to tell me what you knew about Sombra... I mean me," I quickly corrected.

"As if we'd tell you anything," she huffed. "You are the most evil pony the Crystal Empire has ever seen."

What was that? I beamed widely beneath the muzzle. Ha! The pony slipped up on the first sentence, it seemed.

"Crystal Empire?" I asked. Cadence's mouth closed so fast I heard her teeth click together. "So that's what I'm the king of! About time I got some answers. You've got to tell me, where is this 'Crystal Empire?'"

Cadence was exceedingly glad that she had thrown away that lie detector. "W-w-w-what?!" she exclaimed. She thought fast enough not to reveal where we were, but not quick enough to lie convincingly. "Nowhere! I have no idea!"

"Really?" I leaned in suspiciously. "Because it sounds like you know exactly where it is."

"It-it- it's on the other side of the world!" she blurted an obvious fib. "Anywhere but here!"

I had no response for that. Not very surreptitious, was she? But weirdly enough, I was inclined to believe her. Going on dream-logic, being on the exact opposite side of the world meant that I had a vast and epic journey ahead of me. That was exactly the type of plot I'd dream up. At last, a destination was at hand! This Crystal Empire was ripe for the plucking. It... uh, hold on a sec...

"Wait up. I know I heard that term before." I recalled as Cadence felt a dark feeling of dread wash over her whole body. "Right before Shiny chased me, he said he was the prince of a Crystal Empire. But if he's the prince, then... Aha! I was wrong before. It wasn't you who's my kid; it's Shining Armor!"

Whoops, there she goes. Cadence facepalmed for real this time.

The ponies of Equestria were the most psychologically broken species to ever develop sentience, and just about every last one of them was due for a break-down at some point in their lives. There was something in their nature, probably the herd mentality, which made them prone to fits of fearful panic and wild overreactions. While crystal ponies might be a bit more levelheaded than their matte-coated

cousins, who had refined the concept of pandemonium down to an art, they were nonetheless a powder keg in large groups.

Shining Armor was dealing with a large group.

"And be rest assured that the situation is fully under control," he proclaimed to the masses. His whole spiel so far had just been different phrasings of the same reassurances. They ate it up at first, but they were slowly getting more unruly. Due to his military upbringing, his ideal speech would be little longer than 'We got him. Everything is fine. Go home.' And quite frankly, it had been exactly that. Knowing that his wife was alone with the worst pony ever put him in no mood to be offering support. He wanted to return to the palace as soon as possible.

"All we ask is that you remain calm. Sombra is in our custody and is being questioned personally by the princess."

"What's there to question? Throw away the key!"

Despite agreeing with the sentiment, he had to keep interruptions, and thus potential losses of control, down to a minimum. "This is a delicate situation and we have procedures to-"

"No police! Mob justice!"

Shining armor stomped a hoof and pointed to the back of the crowd, refusing to continue until the disturbance had been removed. The enthusiastically aggressive crystal pony lowered her head and slinked off to the back of the herd.

"This is not a mob!" Shining Armor asserted to the increasingly uncooperative crowd. "Yes, Sombra has returned, and yes, he survived a blast from the Crystal Heart, but we are doing everything in our power to keep you safe. Just go home and wait this out. The palace is under lockdown, and anypony found on the grounds will be considered trespassing."

"But that's the city's main intersection."

"Avoid it," he demanded.

Admittedly, there was some appeal to just throwing Sombra to the herd, but that would be like releasing a shark into a school of minnows. His subjects were angry, and they wanted nothing more than to face their oppressor, assuming he was safely unable to retaliate, but it was in their best interests to keep them as far away from Sombra as possible.

"To ensure the safety of the Empire, and that proper justice is dealt, Sombra is being kept under our most secure conditions. I assure you, he will answer for his crimes."

Shining Armor had to stop there for a moment as he realized that he wasn't exactly sure what happened a thousand years ago. Really, all he knew was that Sombra was a totalitarian ruler that needed

to be stopped. Celestia told everyone that he enslaved the populace and caused the city to disappear for the thousand years he was imprisoned. He knew for a fact that they had more than enough dirt on Sombra to give him life in prison, but he wanted to offer the crystal ponies a more personal touch.

Any real knowledge of what went down a millennium ago would come from these ponies.

"I understand that you have all had your memories sealed, but can anypony remember enough about Sombra's reign to offer a testimony?"

None of them answered. A couple ponies looked like they wanted to help, but immediately shivered and clammed up.

"Any of you? Even the smallest bits of information could help."

The gathered crystal ponies looked back and forth throughout the crowd, seeing if anyone was willing to talk, but no one had anything to offer. "No, but it was really bad," someone insisted.

"How very convenient for him," Shiny mumbled. Unfortunately, their cursed-induced amnesia was still very much in place. Most of their memories were restored during the fair that defeated Sombra, but the actual reign of the king was still repressed, perhaps willfully if their shivering was any sign.

That raised an interesting question; just how long did Sombra rule the country? Even with the amnesia, the crystal ponies had undamaged personalities, few repressed memories except for those locked by the curse, and none of them seemed terribly traumatized. If things were as bad as they said it was, then Sombra must have been in charge for maybe a year, tops.

Besides, it was the alicorn sisters who disposed him. They wouldn't have let a tyrant stay in power for very long.

"How are we supposed to sleep at night knowing that King Sombra is still around?" The captain was snapped out of his musing by another question.

"Just Sombra," Shiny corrected. "He is not your king anymore. Princess Cadence and I have him under close supervision, and I promise that he will not harm any of you."

It was nothing new, but the pony was satisfied. To be blunt, that was the reason most of them showed up in the first place. They just wanted to hear the comforting words of their leaders until they weren't afraid anymore.

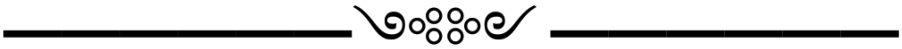
Others, however, were more proactive in their quest for peace of mind, much to the detriment of Shining Armor's diplomacy efforts.

"Everypony, I brought torches," that same pony who was earlier sent to the back offered helpfully. She was answered with soft, appreciative cheers as she began to pass them out.

Shining Armor seized the torches in his magic and levitated them out of reach. “Did you hear anything I said? No vigilantism!”

“Awww,” he heard a few whines of disappointment. Shining had to force himself not to scoff in irritation. Civilians were the Murphy’s Law of peacekeeping operations. Just like that, after finally calming the masses, he was back at square one.

“No torches, no mobs, and I don’t know where you got that pitchfork, but put it down!” he ordered. “For your own protection, do not take any action into your own hooves, do not approach the palace until it has been cleared, and above all else, do not attempt to contact Sombra. Just go home and let us take care of it. We are the government, and we’re here to help.”



It had taken some time, but Cadence managed to explain to me that Shiny and I did not share a Luke/Vader style relationship. Pity, because I was totally about to abuse that connection to start a redemption arc for myself.

I’d hate to admit it, but I was out of ideas. Cadence was revealing as little as possible to me, most likely trying to prevent a relapse into my Sombra persona like she had earlier claimed. There was no danger of that happening, of course, but she didn’t know that and wouldn’t believe me if I told her. Ultimately, there was only one way to end this madness; it was time to drop the act. They say honesty is the best policy, right? I just hoped she didn’t take it too hard.

“Listen. There is, uh, something I need to tell you,” I spoke in my serious voice and put on my serious face, “and it’s going to be pretty unbelievable.”

“’Unbelievable’ describes my whole day so far. What is it now?” Since there was no hope of getting this interrogation back on track, Cadence had given up all pretenses of formality and professionalism and was now lying across from me on the floor. As quadrupeds, ponies didn’t share the same social mores we did, so she saw no problem just plopping down on the ground. I’d be astonished if they invented the chair.

“I’m not kidding. What I’m about to tell you is some serious ‘why didn’t I take the blue pill’ horrible truth that you aren’t supposed to know.”

“Try me,” she placed the pony equivalent of an elbow on the floor and rested her head on a hoof. “I’ve been through an awful lot recently, and I don’t think anything you can say would surprise me.”

Whelp, she asked for it.

"Okay. I won't sugarcoat it, so here it is." I cleared my throat dramatically. It wasn't often you got to break the fourth wall in real life so I wanted to draw out the moment. "Princess Cadence, you are a figment of my imagination."

Cadence, not convinced that I was for real, tilted her head questioningly. "Huh?"

Not the reaction I expected. "What? No indignant denial. No incredulous dismissal. You aren't going to laugh it off? Clichés exist for a reason, princess, get with the program. I just told you that you're an actor in my unconscious and possibly damaged brain. Do a spit take."

"E-Excuse me?" she asked completely flabbergasted. Yeah, that one came right out of left field, but I needed to hammer the point home. I could actually see her train of thought get derailed, and I claimed a small victory from her obvious shock. She had the best 'this just got real' face I'd seen for a very long time. "You... you think you're..."

"I'm pretty sure I'm in a coma, or under sedation, or some other kind of deep sleep," I explained, cutting her off. "Have you ever had one of those falling dreams? You know, where you wake up the second before you hit the ground? If this were a normal dream I would have woken up when Shiny was screaming for my head. Man, that guy was a d-"

"Shining Armor is my husband."

"- delightful person," I shamelessly backpedaled. They're married? How did I not figure that out by now? "So, yeah, I'm not waking up anytime soon."

Cadence seemingly forgot how to blink. "You can't possibly be serious."

"I am being serious. All of this," I said, waving a hoof around the room, "is a lucid dream. I can do whatever I want. Check this out: I can make your pen float through the air."

I proceeded to do just that, grabbing her quill in a shady aura and making it fly around the room like a paper airplane. I whistled spookily and took great pleasure in my impossible feat.

"That's just a mundane application of basic magic," she countered, ducking the quill while I performed a flyby right over her nose. Woosh.

"Mundane magic," I repeated with a chuckle. "I'm starting to like this place."

She held out a hoof and beckoned me to give her the pen. Not wanting a fight, I gave it back, but not before one last corkscrew. Cadence's completely neutral impassiveness took the wind out of my sails. C'mon, I thought it was cool.

Whatever checkboxes she had on that paper were assuredly too undetailed to deal with this interview. She tossed the useless thing aside, thinking that there was no possible way this could get any worse.

Hail to the King

Oh the humanity, she did not know what she was in for.

I let out a deep breath, knowing there was no smooth way to introduce the topic. “There’s more. This might seem a bit weird, but do you know what a human is?”

She shook her head suspiciously, having no idea where I was going with this. My confession of this being a dream really threw her for a loop. “No. What is that, a title?”

“It’s a species: the best species,” I answered.

Cadence, unfortunately, had no idea what I was talking about, and the gears started turning in her mind to make sense of it. Floating her papers back up to her, she started writing notes. Was King Sombra saying that he was a totally separate type of pony? It was said that zebras were very closely related to the four known subspecies, and the reemergence of the crystal ponies themselves raised many equinological questions. Could Sombra have been a long-lost cousin of today’s unicorn? Perhaps he was the last of his race. “That would explain the horn,” she mumbled under her breath.

“We’re five to six-foot tall omnivores with a pair of hands, two legs, and no snout,” I explained with absolutely no prodding on her part.

“... eh?” She stopped writing. One of her eyelids twitched and the rest of her face twisted somewhere between astonishment and skepticism. The only thing needed to complete the image was the sound of tires shrieking to a stop.

“I told you this is a dream, right? Well, the real world doesn’t have anything like you, and it is absolutely packed with humans. Like, a crazy amount of us all over the place. We’ve pretty much ruled the world ever since we showed up.”

“Of... of course. The human species. ” Nodding, she replied with the single most strained and uncomfortable smile ever given. Trying not to look suspicious, she scribbled wildly on her notepad.

“We... hmm. How do I explain this? It’s not every day you have to explain the entirety of mankind to someone who doesn’t know about it.” I started with the basics, trying to think of the things we take for granted, but they would find strange. “Hands are awesome. You can grab things and snap your fingers. Also, clothing; we always wear clothes.” I blinked and looked down. “And I am just now noticing that I am not wearing pants. Let’s ignore that.”

I probably should have introduced this slower, but I was in a groove. Besides, she didn’t ask questions, so I took that as an invitation to keep talking.

“No magic, either. I don’t know how advanced you are, but we use electricity for pretty much everything, like powering transportation or lighting whole cities.”

At the time, I didn't know how ingrained magic was to the workings of this world. They considered it one of the fundamental forces of the universe, so I had just said something akin to 'gravity doesn't exist' or 'atoms aren't a thing.'

"Uh... huh," the princess bid me to keep going. She used the slow, quiet motions of someone trying to prevent a wild animal from charging. The quill never stopped scratching away at that notepad.

"These days, just about everyone has a cell phone," I continued, neither elucidating the concept nor defining the term. "We've got all kinds of neat machines. You could say we're dependent on them, especially cars. It must seem like a crutch to you, but we couldn't have accomplished nearly as much as we have without our inventions. Did you know we've been to space?"

Aaaaaaand there it went. The last bit of credulity in Cadence's mind chiseled away to nothing. "You can stop now, Sombra. You pushed it too far. Stop it. Stop messing around with me."

"Huh? But I'm telling the tru-"

Cadence stomped her hoof to the ground and glared at me. That thing was like a built-in gavel. "You are a liar and I won't hear any more of this. I came here for answers and you're just playing games."

"I'm not! I really am a bipedal ape-creature from a space-age democracy!" Good God, I was terrible at explanations. "Shoot. Pretend I said that in a way that isn't crazy. I mean – It's not crazy. I'm not crazy! Stop inching away to the door, Cadence!"

She pointed her hoof at me and then at her eyes a couple of times in that 'I'm watching you' motion. Then, with a completely blank expression, the princess got up and left the room.

I should have expected them to think I was lying. After all, I was supposed to be some generic, archetypal, overpowered villain. Lying was something the bad guys did, and boy did I look the part of the part of the bad guy. Everything about my appearance – my red eyes, terrifying magic, fangs, and armor –screamed 'evil' at the top of its lungs. And my crown had spikes on it just to drive the point further.

On a related note, there had better be one of the good horses with a black coat. Because if black equated to evil in my own dream, the furious tantrum I'd throw would be the stuff of legends. For now, I chalked it up to coincidence and assumed that prejudice was impossible in horse-world, if only because these ponies were more colorful than the language in a traffic jam. But seriously, what the heck?

What was I talking about? Right, I looked scary and I was an evil overlord.

But if that really was the case, then these guys were handling it surprisingly well. I couldn't imagine what the situation would be like in reverse. What would happen if Hitler showed up in France one day claiming to be a friendly unicorn? That the ponies even bothered to open a dialogue was a testament to their open-mindedness.

That is, except for the whole 'murder on sight' thing. But whatever: dodging every last one of Shining Armor's shots, being unaffected by their superweapon, and not being sent to an unceremonious execution confirmed for me that I had invincible plot-armor to save my butt.

With a loud clunk, the door opened back up and Cadence plodded her way back inside. So she didn't leave after all. Instead, she had retrieved that magical lie detector from where she had earlier thrown it.

Cadence placed the gem right between us and gave it her rapt, undivided attention. "Say that again. Say that human thing right to the crystal."

"Alright," The truth was already revealed, but there was no shame in wanting proof. "I, the person in front of you, whom you know as King Sombra, am a human being."

PING! Whatever hope she kept that this was all a joke vanished beneath the verisimilitude of her lie detector.

"This is a dream," I continued. "You aren't real, ponies don't exist, and magic is a lie."

BZZRT! It bzzrted. Cadence exhaled a breath she didn't know she was holding and nearly collapsed in relief. All was well. Sombra was just being a liar like a villain should. He wasn't completely insane.

"Oh. Sorry. I meant ponies like you. Regular Earth ponies exist, but they're just animals. The rest of that statement was true."

PING! With a triumphant grin, I pointed theatrically at the green crystal. Cadence's jaw went slack and her levitation flickered out, causing the quill she was holding to slowly flutter to the floor. I wasn't sure where it came from, but I was pretty sure I heard the sound of breaking glass.

Since she was stunned to immobility, I scooted closer to make the conversation friendlier. "I know the truth hurts, lady, but please stop looking at me like I grew an extra head. There's so much more you need to know."

Very slowly, very carefully, she stood up and backed an extra few feet away from me. She attempted a smile, but it was obviously forced and I saw her eyes dart to the exit a few times.

"Do you want to hear more?" I asked. She shook her head no so fast her head blurred. "Too bad. This is happening."

Hours later, Shining Armor galloped back to the palace, having defused any forming mobs and convinced the city that the world was not ending.

When the crystal ponies couldn't share any details about Sombra's time as their dictator, he became more than a little concerned. Just how powerful of a curse did it take to selectively remove the memories of an entire city, especially if that spell could remain intact after the correcting influence of the Crystal Heart?

Imagination tended to draw the worst possible scenario. Sombra was truly a monster among ponies.

An update from one of his guards told him that Cadence was finished with the questioning, so he made a beeline for her office, eager to be filled in on the interrogation. Her door was closed and he heard nothing from inside it so he knocked before entering.

"Cadence?" There was no answer so he let himself in, where he saw her working at a feverish pace.

His wife had raided the city's considerably large library for any book on psychology she could find. She brought a massive pile back with her, some now floating through the air in a circle around her while most others were strewn about haphazardly after being discarded. Twilight would be proud, if a bit troubled by the mess. She hadn't noticed her husband had arrived.

"Cadence?" he walked over and poked her to get her attention.

"Eep!" The alicorn jumped, so engrossed in her reading was she that the unexpected presence startled her as if struck. She looked stressed. Actually, stressed was a grievously inadequate term to describe her at that moment. Even her mane looked like it had lost some of its color. "Shiny! It's just you," she breathed a sigh of relief. "Sorry, I was a little focused there." Loose papers telekinetically stacked themselves as Cadence made her workplace presentable.

"So," he took a worried glance at all the research his wife was trudging through. "Can I ask what happened?"

The princess clapped the book she was reading closed with a haunted look on her face. "I'm still trying to figure that out, but in laymen's terms, he's nuts. Simple as that: Sombra has gone insane. I walked into that room thinking it was just amnesia, but he has absolutely lost his mind."

"Is that an official diagnosis?" Shining Armor asked, trying to break the tension. His wife didn't find it amusing. "Come on, Cadence, tell me what happened. How did the session go?"

With a long, dreary exhale she got up from her work and flopped bonelessly on a sofa.

"It was horrible. It started off pretty crazy and kept spiraling downward from there." She rubbed her eyes then reclined back in a nearly perfect Rarity imitation. "This is the last thing I need. And with so much else on my plate right now, I can't deal with that." She pointed in the general direction of their

dungeons. “I can’t handle it. This is too much. I just- I just need…” She gazed longingly at the royal liquor cabinet, but quickly turned her head before temptation could take root.

Besides, it wouldn’t be enough, not unless she could find a funnel and a large bucket on very short notice. She was quickly finding that the burden of leadership was a thankless, insatiable leech that will do anything in its power to break her soul. And now the world decided to throw Sombra on top of that.

Luckily, Shining Armor was there. He trotted over to join her on the couch and nuzzled her supportively. Although he didn’t know what to say to comfort his troubled wife, just being there meant an awful lot to her.

“Um… on a scale of one to ten, just how crazy are we talking?”

“No, Shiny. What he has is so, so much worse. This isn’t a scale of one to ten. This is like breaking through the scale and circling back to ten a second time. I hate to say this, but I have never seen anyone so deeply and irrationally troubled. I have no idea where to even begin.”

Cadence magically opened a scrying portal into the prisoner’s cell, revealing King Sombra quietly singing to himself in boredom.

“*Hey y’all prepare yourself for the rubberbaaaaand man. You never heard a sound like the rubber-band maaaAAAaaann~*”

Cadence then closed the portal, her point now glaringly self-evident. “See what I mean? Nuts.” She slumped as deep as she could into her couch and jotted down some new information. “And apparently he’s hearing things too.”

Shining Armor opened and closed his mouth a few times, no words coming out. Sure, after that whole ‘who the heck am I’ episode in the town square, he had assumed that Sombra had a few screws knocked loose, but for him to be an actual, deranged loony was not something Shiny thought possible.

“He’s really that far gone?”

Cadence just turned her head towards him, where he could see the bags developing under her eyes.

“Oh, that bad, huh. Amazing. At least we know he is not faking it.”

Cadence tossed another one of her books to a nearby table. “It doesn’t matter what his state of mind is. He is still King Sombra, and therefore still dangerous. All that matters is whether or not he is a threat to the Crystal Empire. Even if he doesn’t know who he is, that still means that all the dark powers of somepony Celestia and Luna had to personally deal with are now in the hooves of a recklessly irresponsible nutcase. One who, I might add, said that earth ponies were just animals!”

Shining Armor scowled at that latest bit of information. It wasn’t bad enough for Sombra to be a regular garden-variety villain; he had to throw tribalism into the mix too.

“Please don’t tell me he’s too crazy to stand trial. The crystal ponies out there are calling for blood as it is.”

“Who’s to say? Of the two potential therapists in the Crystal Empire, one was actually an exorcist and the other tried to schedule a bloodletting.” She wrote down another note to put on her ‘to do’ pile. “That reminds me, we’re going to have a very long chat with our medical board.” Such were the difficulties of ruling a time-displaced nation. “We will need a real doctor for an actual diagnosis, but as it stands you could open a psychology textbook to a random page and odds are he’s got it. He thinks he’s a space-monkey from another dimension.”

The air stood still as the white unicorn heard, dissected, and ultimately rejected that last sentence. He was absolutely certain that he did not hear it correctly.

“What,” Shiny said flatly and allowed it marinate in his head for a while. “... *What*!?”

But Cadence wasn’t done, not by a longshot.

“He has completely lost all touch with reality. Sombra told me that magic doesn’t exist – immediately after using a levitation spell – and that the world is all his dream, and that we’re all figments of his imagination, among other things. He doesn’t even know what country he’s in.”

Shining Armor could barely keep up with all this madness. “Whoa, whoa, wait. Go back to that monkey thing. You can’t just drop that and not explain it.”

Cadence sneered wearily. “Sombra called himself a ‘human.’ How he cooked this up in his head, I’ll never know, but it’s pure madness and science fiction. From what I managed to work out, a human is a type of hairless sasquatch that controls electricity.”

That sent Shining Armor back into stunned silence as he imagined a bald gorilla launching thunderbolts from its hands. “Whaa- it- huh- wha?” He kept starting to ask questions and cutting himself off as more flooded into his mind. “How could they control lightning without magic?”

Why he latched on to that one, he wasn’t sure. He guessed that the ‘human’ thing was so crazy that he’d at least start with something addressable.

Hail to the King

"I don't know!" Cadence threw her hooves in the air and cut off her telekinesis. Whatever books she was still holding fell noisily to the floor. "By that point I just let him prattle on and made sure there was nothing sharp in the room."

"Uh-oh." His time in the guard forced him to deal with all kinds of weirdoes, including ponies that needed to be pacified and shipped to the hospital before they hurt anyone. "He didn't lash out at you, did he? Sombra isn't, you know, that kind of crazy is he?"

Cadence shook her head. "No, he never got violent. Actually, he wasn't even angry. All he did was ensure beyond any shadow of a doubt that I knew he wasn't joking, that he literally thought he wasn't a pony, and that I saw how unnecessarily detailed his fantasy world was. It was weird and frustrating. Would he feign insanity to make us drop our guard?" she gripped the sides of her head as if to keep it from exploding. "And I'm still not sure if he was just messing with me for his own amusement."

Shining Armor raised an eyebrow, wondering how in the world they were going to deal with this. "So… you think he was monkeying around?"

Cadence smirked despite herself. "You are so awful."

Happy that he could get his wife out of her funk for a moment, Shiny threw a hoof over Cadence's shoulders. "Okay, things could have been a lot worse, all things considered. That 'human' thing was… wow. Just wow. But he isn't hostile, and that's the most important thing." There was a small silver lining to all of this, even if he had to look very, very closely for it. "Now I may regret asking this, but you did you mean when you said his delusion was 'madness and science fiction.'"

The alicorn let out a single, humorless laugh. "Oh boy, was it ever. He spent that whole time babbling on about how great humans are. That they're capable of building or doing anything, they are so advanced that they don't need magic, their weapons can level a city in one blow, and they've somehow cobbled together a functioning democracy. The list goes on and on. It's like he designed one of those too-perfect races from a cheesy fantasy book."

Shining Armor slowly blinked a couple times and let his wife continue.

"He went into specifics too." Cadence blew an errant strand of her mane out of her eyes. "Get ready for a headache: putting aside his inflated assumptions of what computers can do, did Twilight ever tell you about the Flim-Flam brothers and their magic-fueled car?" she asked, to which Shining Armor nodded. "Well, it's like he heard a vague account of that and decided it wasn't good enough. According to Sombra, human cars are made of steel, powered by explosions, and can travel over a hundred miles an hour. All of this is non-magical by the way. Also, their airships don't need balloons because *of course they don't*."

"No way," Shining Armor turned his head aside, hiding a ghost of a smile that was forming on his lips. The closest comparison they had was the engines used in trains, so he imagined that the human world was some kind of steampunk setting, but with primates swinging all over the place.

"Yep. Then he waxed nostalgically about their arenas filled with lions and tigers. Don't even get me started on their buildings. He called them 'sky scrapers.' Guess how tall they are."

Snrk! Though he put up a valiant fight preventing himself from laughing, he couldn't repress a snort.

Cadence glared at him for not being helpful. "I was in there for hours, Shiny. *Hours*!"

"I'm just having a hard time picturing King Sombra, of all ponies, going that far off the deep end." He didn't stop smirking. Hearing that his enemy had gone completely bonkers was like watching a political cartoon come to life.

The more he tried to hide his grin, the more his wife scowled. "This isn't funny, Shining. He thinks he's an ape! How do you reason with that!?"

"Sorry," he squeaked.

Mostly to keep her husband informed, but partially so she could share the pain with someone, Cadence continued her explanation. "He said there were billions of them all over the world, living in cities that make Canterlot look like a hamlet."

"Billions," Shining Armor bit his tongue to keep any outbursts at bay. "Then how come I've never met one? We should be drowning in a sea of humans by now."

"Because we're just figments of his imagination, remember?" By now, she too was having a hard time keeping a straight face. "So that's where his mind is right now. He's a hyper-evolved, futuristic, thunder-monkey."

"That's," Shining Armor pursed his lips, visibly shaking from suppressed chuckles. "You're right. That's not funny. This is actually a serious problem."

Cadence covered her face, totally failing to keep her composure. Her mental jack-in-the-box could only be cranked so much before it pops, and dealing with this mankind business spun her out of control. "I know. Sombra, he... hehe." She hid her mouth under her forelegs to keep the laughs in, but there was no stopping it at this point. "Sombra... Sombra said... Ahahahahaha! Oh my goodness, you need to hear the whole thing. Ask- ask him about rocket ships. It's Ha ha hahahaha!"

And the dam broke. Shining Armor and Princess Cadence together burst out in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Humanity, the strangest comedy the universe ever wrote, was simply too much for them to handle all at once. They had been wound up by a lot of stress recently, and now everything they had been through today; the fear of their most hated enemy returning, the desperation of ensuring

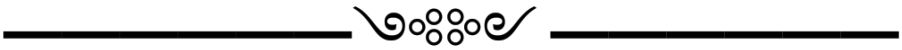
that every one of their citizens were safe and protected, and the ongoing anxiety of running a country from day to day welled to the surface and was released in loud, silly, cathartic laughs until there was no more air in their lungs.

Gradually, the princess got ahold of herself. “I needed that.” Still giggling, she gripped the white unicorn in a tight hug. “Oh, Shiny, what have we gotten ourselves into?”

“I don’t know.” With one last chuckle, Shining Armor restored his soldierly fortitude. “But we need to keep him under lock and key. As long as he is safely within the dungeon walls he can’t cause any trouble.”

That poor thing. He wasn’t just tempting fate. Oh no, the good captain actively seduced and made hard, sweet, weird love to it.

Within seconds, the doors burst open and a crystal pony guard, incidentally the same one that first warned them of this unyieldingly exacerbating mess, stampeded through the entrance. “Sombra is escaping!”



I was bored.

A simple sentence, but it might be the single most terrifying combination of three words ever said, with the possible exceptions of ‘where’s my gun’ and ‘it’s your baby.’ Just sitting here in a prison with no one to talk to – the sentries were poor conversationalists – became teeth-gratingly dull after the first few minutes, and as the hours passed the tedium became a burden I could almost feel physically.

Under normal circumstances I’d be a lot more cooperative. Maybe I’d even be terrified of the thought of being locked in an unknown dungeon on an alien pony-world. But, this whole time, I’d been behaving under two assumptions. Firstly, I thought my own mind conjured up this whole situation. Therefore, all the social mores of politeness, fear of the unknown, shyness, and anything else that kept us fettered on a day-to-day basis went right out the window; these ponies weren’t real so their opinions didn’t matter. Secondly, I thought I was entitled to some entertainment. The purpose of dreams was to keep you occupied until reality comes a-knocking. Right now, it was failing me in that regard, hence the boredom.

I was more patient that this. I knew that for a fact, but the aforementioned factors trampled all over my even-tempered qualities and demanded that something interesting happen. Anyone should be able to keep their impulses in check under normal circumstances, but this was a situation where I expected constant amusement and instant gratification. Imagine having to wait several hours for a webpage to load, but you weren’t allowed to leave the computer.

Introspection was an awful thing in large doses. After a while, I began to wonder if the prison was a metaphor for some deeper psychological issues that I never knew I had.

Indignation grew with every tick of the clock. Not literally, of course. If there was an actual clock loudly tick-tocking away in my small, silent room, I'd have blown it up with a warcry. Instead, I was left with my thoughts running a mile a minute.

I was still mad that I didn't have hands. It wasn't such a bad thing to spend the dream in some weird, non-human form, but couldn't it be something more convenient? Why did this place have to go full horse and not be, like, a centaur-world or something?

Tick-fricking-tock.

"Gwuuuuuuuhh," I groaned. Monotony made for one somber Sombra.

"Be quiet in there," said the serious stallion sentinel, though there was no telling which one since they both looked the same.

And that right there was where my patience ran dry. I couldn't take it anymore. Figures that the one black horse in the country got sent to jail the moment he entered a nice neighborhood. Nope. The rule of law had failed and I wasn't the type to drink the hemlock. Plan B was initiated: escape.

"Yo, guards, you aren't standing directly in front of the door, are you?"

"We have nothing to say to you." One of them said, revealing their positions.

And thus, a plan was made. I sat down on the floor and concentrated. "Hrrrrmm," focusing hard, sweat began forming on my brow. One again, my horn did its freaky luminescence for a few seconds before a small but very sharp crystal erupted from the ground just behind me. It tore right through the strait jacket and manacles.

Oh my God that was so much better. I immediately tore that thing off and shook like a dog. The muzzle came off right after.

And now it was time for step two: an impromptu, self-taught magic lesson. How do I shoot laser beams? Shining Armor made it look easy. In fact, it was evidently so easy that during our chase he could use them when he was so ticked off that he wasn't capable of coherent thought. All I had to do was charge it up and throw it, right?

"Okay, power it up," I mumbled to myself. The horn glowed brighter and brighter. "And, when it's good 'n ready... fire!" I shot a mammoth burst of magic at the door where it exploded magnificently.

"By Celestia!" A guard outside screamed.

Yes! I could do more than just the things with the rocks. I wasn't a one-trick pony!

Hail to the King

"Alright, so, releasing it all at once makes things explode, but shoving it in a general that-a-ways direction makes laser beams. Magic is easy."

If the Elder Scrolls series taught me anything, it's that you can become Archmage by brainlessly smashing things and lighting them aflame. So, despite having absolutely none of the education or experiences needed to effectively cast magic, I assumed there'd be no issues using these powers that I was ridiculously unqualified for.

And I was right!

To be fair, mastery of these unfathomable forces was a pretty distant goal. Shiny's magic was like a well-practiced rifle of pinpoint precision. Mine was more like a grenade launcher: blindly destructive and probably a felony. And all Shining Armor did was tilt his head down and go pew-pew, unlike me, who charged it up before hurling it where it needed to go. I supposed it really was more like chucking a bomb than firing a gun, so yeah, apt analogy; Good job, me.

The guards were already going wild, but when I dented the door nearly to the breaking point with a second magical discharge they really started to panic.

"You stay here and stop him, I'll alert the princess," one said to his counterpart before dashing off.

"What!? No, don't leave me here!"

A third blast launched the whole thing outward. The door ricochet down the hallway like a pinball, bouncing wildly until it rattled to a stop on the floor – thankfully not hitting any pony. As a sidenote, was any-pony one word or two?

"He broke down the door!" the guard screamed down the now empty hallway. He managed to get his spear out despite his full-body shiver.

"Yeah, sorry 'bout that. You should call a hoofypony to fix it," I commented as the dust settled.

"A... a what?" momentarily dumbfounded out of attack mode, the guard was unable to puzzle together whatever the heck I just said. Guess I was wrong about that one. I was starting to think I should stick to my normal way of speaking instead of trying to adopt this laughable pony-argot.

"Sombra, don't you dare step out of that cell!" the stallion shouted. Good luck with that, buddy; I was on a mission now. Wild horses couldn't drag me away, so this little guy didn't stand a chance.

"No way, little dude. I'm out of here." I was all smiles as I cheerfully stepped past the threshold.

BZZAP!

"Gah!" A sudden jolt zapped me unexpectedly. Oh, duh, silly me. I forgot all about the shock collar, but it was a simple fix. grabbing either side in a haze of black telekinesis, I pulled outward in one

mighty exertion to snap that thing in half. There, now that everything was out of the way I could leave unmolested.

Whichever way that was supposed to be, I wasn't sure.

"Hey, um, guard? Which way is the exit?"

"I-I-I-I"ll never tell you." He pointed his spear at me, but it seemed like he was holding it more like a security blanket than an actual weapon. I hated having this effect on others. No worries, though. Once I was out of here, I could meet people – or ponies – who weren't' afraid of me, and I'd be out of this guy's hair.

... I meant mane.

"You know what? I'll just go in a straight line." That declared, I detonated the wall right across from me, the first blast left a huge spiderweb of cracks on its surface, and a subsequent second explosion revealed an empty room that I moseyed right on into like I owned the place.

Dang it, when I noticed that there was another wall, I discovered the flaw in my plan. I'd probably have to break my way through several rooms before breaching the outer surface. It was upsetting, but I already got started, so I decided to stick with it. The shortest distance between two points was a straight line torn through several sections of Cadence's house. Euclid said that. Another magic blast destroyed this latest obstacle.

Wow. That wall went down with one shot. It seems that the more frustrated I get, the more powerful my magic becomes, as if it feeds off my negative emotions.

I stopped in my tracks as I made that deduction. Oh... Oh! Did that mean that I was, like, powered by hatred or something? That... uh, that was pretty worrisome. It made sense for a villain, but I already decided not to do any of that. These powers weren't intrinsically bad, were they? Did the dreaded arcane might of my rancorous sorcery have any constructive uses? I sure hoped so.

Questions for another time. For now, focus stayed solely on escaping. More crystalline walls needed to be blown away, and I was just the guy to do it.

I kept juggernauting through room after room, starting to wonder if I had taken the long way out. I also questioned why I wasn't stuffed in a basement, but then I remembered the Eiffel Tower-like design of the palace and concluded that this place didn't even have a basement. And now that I thought about it, why were so many of these rooms empty? I hadn't the foggiest idea why there was so much wasted space in an alleged capital building, but it made me feel less guilty about blowing my way through them.

And another one. *BOOM!* And another one. *BOOM!* Another blasted right to dust. "I'm making great progress. Eat your heart out, Morgan Freeman, jail breaks are easy when you're a horse-

sorcerer." Laughing as more explosions mined out my escape tunnel, I thought about important things. "I will be genuinely upset if magic-using ponies aren't called 'horserers.'"

To reiterate, these were very important things.

What I was doing wasn't so much of a jailbreak as it was storming a castle in reverse. This had better be over quickly, because I was starting to get exhausted.

My improving mood weakened each spell, so when I finally found daylight it was from a hole barely the size of a grapefruit. Concentrating hard, one final explosion detonated the outer wall to the palace to an acceptable size, and I could see the city several stories beneath me. "FREEEEEDOOOOOMM!" I bravehearted in a deep, triumphant bellow.

It rang hollow. Something about this just didn't seem right. At first, I thought it was the lack of an exultant echo, or maybe it was because there wasn't a boss battle at the end, but one look at myself and realized exactly what the problem was.

"Whoops. Missing something important."

Despite being a single step away from escape, I made my way back to the dungeon in a half-walk-half-run that people do when they're late but don't want to look like they're in a rush. My bloated sense of entitlement demanded that I preserve some dignity, after all, but I made it back quickly enough.

"He's circling back around!" the guard screamed absolutely panicked beyond belief. I didn't know who he was screaming to because there was no one else here. The guards were mostly there for show and no one actually expected them to do anything, but he hadn't abandoned his post, so good for him.

"Forgot my cape," I explained, passing right by him without a fight. It wouldn't be right to have a victorious escape without a cape billowing heroically in the breeze. That thing was awesome. Sure enough, there it was sitting just outside my cell. They said I corrupted things, so I guessed that they wanted to concentrate all Sombra-ness in one location. The cape and the plate armor on my neck and legs had been removed so the strait jacket would fit, and I wanted them back.

Setting of on getting this regalia back in place, I had barely half of the stuff back on when, right on cue, the two royal ponies stormed into the dungeon, horns ablaze, ready to do battle with the evil emperor. "Where is he?!"

What answered her was a flabbergasted crystal pony guard wordlessly pointing down the hall, where said tyrant was struggling with the latches of his armor.

"Aw, crap! They're already here!?" I exclaimed. Their response time should've been several minutes at best. That would have given me plenty of time to escape. Arg, why did I go back for the cape? "I mean, uh... hi, everyone," I greeted beside my wide open cell. "I figured out how to shoot magic."

I was proud to admit that there wasn't too much of a mess, but everything else was pretty condemning. The door had been blown off its hinges and was now lying a considerable distance down the hall. Inky black smoke wafted from a scorch mark in its center, leaving absolutely no question that I was the one who blasted it; a smoking gun, if you will. The same could be said for the path of destruction I had wrought through innocent walls, rooms, and halls to create a long passageway.

More disturbing to the ponies, however, was the gaping crater I had left in the outer wall. A hole the size of the palace's main entrance had been shot straight through its magically reinforced stone. Fresh air and sunshine poured into the formerly dank prison to demonstrate that nothing stood between me and my freedom.

"Knew I should have made it ten," Shiny mumbled.

Oh dear. Caught red-handed. This was a whole new and unexplored level of boned that few could ever hope to experience. I desperately needed to find a way to weasel out of this.

"Umm," I flubbed for a plausible lie. "Now, uh, you're all probably upset –" their effulgent, quasar-like horns brightened at my pathetic underestimation – "but I did this to make a point. I'm still here, securely by my cell, even though I can leave whenever I want." I gestured to the clear escape route and tapped the floor to prove that I was manifestly there. "See? I want you to trust me. I broke out of prison to prove that I won't break out of prison," I said with a bright smile.

Hey, it worked for Saint Silas; that's in the Bible.

They all gaped at me in a mix of confusion, a bit of anger, and no small amount of annoyance. Cadence seemed to take it the worst, but she was all tapped out of ire at this point and was more exasperated than anything. Both of their horns extinguished from the absurdity of this irrational farce.

I blinked and scratched my chin with a hoof. "Wow. That sounded a lot better in my head. You ever say something and then instantly realize how stupid it sounds?"

More staring. Lots more staring. There was enough empty silence to answer one of those awful puns I kept using.

"Honey? A word," Shining Armor pulled his wife aside and whispered in her ear. They turned their backs to me and huddled close. "What are we going to do? That was the most secure prison we could have possibly given him."

"What makes you think I know? I'd say we should wait for Celestia, but the letter we sent won't reach Canterlot for a few hours."

"Send another letter magically! You're an alicorn. That's what you do, isn't it? My sister's assistant belches up letters from Celestia all the time. There has to be something similar we could use."

"It's not that simple!"

"Then," he struggled for ideas. "Can we seal him in ice like he was before? That was how he was stopped originally."

"No, I can't do that. A: I don't know the spell, B: it took the combined powers of Celestia and Luna, and C: I'm not willing to risk Sombra taking the city with him again!" She hadn't noticed that her quiet whispers intensified into hissy not-quite-yells that I could hear plain as day.

"Is there anything we can do at all?" Shiny asked, also not aware that I could hear him. I started to wonder if I could just walk away while the two of them were talking. "Are there any more secure places in the castle?"

"There should be, but they're in areas accessible only by dark magic. Ironically, he's the only one who can get in and out of them." The only thing preventing her from panicking was the acknowledgment of futility. "How could we have been foolish enough to believe that a mere prison could contain him? If anything, we should be thankful he hasn't taken shadow form and fled."

"Shadow form?" I asked aloud. Cadence's eyes widened to the size of saucers and she froze in place. "That sounds awesome! How do I do that?"

Without the slightest moment of hesitation, my horn bubbled up and released some weird magic powers. Now, whatever it was that guided me didn't feel like muscle memory, but I honestly had no other relatable experiences to describe it. It was as if the horn knew what to do. I wanted to become shadowy so I thought shadowy thoughts and did what came naturally.

"Aaaaawwww yeah, look at it," I beamed widely as my foreleg slowly morphed into black smoke. The hoof was already intangible and the rest of my body began to become hazy. How a black, foggy smoke constitutes a shadow was beyond me, but I wasn't complaining. Take shadow form and flee, she said. What a wonderful suggestion.

At least, that was the plan.

"Oh no, you don't!" Showing surprising reaction speed, Cadence encircled me with yet another one of those magical force fields.

For crying out loud, that must've been the third time they used one of these things against me. Was that, like, the only thing that horserers did? It was effective, but I wanted to see more interesting magic.

"Sombra! Make this easy on yourself and cooperate."

"Heck no! This is boring, and there's a fantastic wonderland of who knows how many things to see outside. It's like I landed in Oz, but got superpowers in the process. This coma won't last forever, and there's no fricking way I'm spending it all in this dark, dingy dungeon!"

"Get back in your cell right now!"

"Not. Gonna! HAPPEN!" They thought they could keep me here? No way. I was a unicorn-wizard-emperor-supervillain in a world of my designing. Negotiations had failed. It was horn-blob time.

I gritted my teeth and charged up my magic. My dark powers, tempered by frustration, prepared to use the same explosive spell that started this whole mess. This ought to show 'em who's boss.

As I unleashed my spell in a bright and deafening explosion, there was just one issue at hand. One tiny, barely noticeable, insignificant, little speed bump hindered my great escape in what would otherwise have been a flawless plan.

Her shield held.

Cadence's barrier ballooned outward in the initial blast, but quickly constricted back to its original size no worse for wear. Instead of a deafening boom, all they heard was a muffled, ineffectual poof. The inside of her bubble turned completely opaque with black smoke, either from my shadowed body or from the contained spell.

Shiny and Cadence looked to one another, each wondering what in the world just happened. Even the guard shrugged.

"Is he dead?" Cadence asked, not quite sure which answer she was hoping for. Any hope for King Sombra's quick and stupidly anticlimactic demise was lost, however, when I started noisily coughing my lungs out.

"Kaaaaack," I wheezed like a three-pack-a-day smoker. "Oh, man that- Haaaack! Coof! That was a terrible idea." Causing an explosion in a tight, enclosed space, I was truly an unparalleled genius. And a lot of me was still smoky when that happened. "Aw crap, did I just inhale part of myself?"

Shining's expression drooped and he answered his wife. "Worse. This pretty much confirms it; he's too crazy to stand trial, but he's still just as dangerous as before."

It was as if a flashbang went off right next to my head. Note to self: Cadence was better at magic than me. Subsequent note: never get smoky again. I smelled like ozone and was thick enough to choke on.

Cadence handled her cargo like it was a bomb, not letting it move slightly and treating any noise like it would spell disaster.

Shining Armor, meanwhile, widened his eyes as an idea started to form in his mind. He had that proverbial light bulb over his head. "I think I know how to keep him under control."

"How?" the princess asked, barely allowing him to finish that last sentence.

"WHAT?" I shouted. My ears were still ringing like crazy. They were talking about me, right? "WHO TURNED OUT THE LIGHTS?"

As was becoming a common theme, they ignored what I asked. Shining armor walked up to the force field and studied it with scientific fervor. “Look at him. I don’t know what happened to his head, but he has no idea how to use his magic effectively, let alone the proper way to dispel a magical construct.” Shiny tapped on the barrier like a glass aquarium. “How many wards did he have to get through to destroy his cell? How much power did he need to break the outer wall? He must have tried a full-powered blast with his magic but the barrier held. I think he has a lot of raw strength, but no control. Sombra’s stuck in there.”

“Shiny, what are you saying?”

“We,” he cleared his throat, “we can contain him.” It should have been a triumphant declaration, but the way he said it sounded almost nervous and resigned.

“WHAT’S GOING ON OUT THERE?” I boomed from the bubble. “SAY, UH, NOT TO BE A INCONVENIENCE, BUT HOW MUCH AIR IS IN THIS THING?”

Cadence looked back at Shining Armor doubtfully. “But we’re the only ones who can use unicorn magic in the Crystal Empire, let alone cast a powerful enough barrier.”

“Yes. We are,” he admitted softly.

We…” It dawned on her. The horrible, horrible implication of what Shining proposed clawed its way into her mind until her eyes shrank to purple pinholes. “Oh no. No. No. No No. Nonono.” She held up her hooves and made warding motions. “No. No. No! *NO*! ***NO***! I’ve had enough of him. I’m not dealing with this mad stallion any longer!”

Shining Armor swallowed nervously. No one involved was going to like this, but it had to be done. “Cadence, this is our responsibility. You and I both know what kind of threat he represents.” He sighed heavily. “I don’t like it either, but I’m saying that if we want to keep the Empire safe, we need to foalsit a dictator.”

Cadence whimpered.

“WHAT?” I shouted again. Did I miss something important?

CHAPTER
THREE

MEETING THE BIG WIGS

A fist-sized rock surrounded in a shady aura floated right in front of my face. No tricks, magnets, or wires held it up; the thing really levitated off the ground. It took all the spare willpower I could muster to not grin stupidly. They actually thought this was a punishment!

Officially, I was being forced to clean up the mess I made of their castle while Shining Armor breathed down my neck, but they were delusional if they thought I'd regret anything. After my first suggestion – a massive order of spackle and wall posters – was forcefully denied, I worried that I was in for some serious backbreaking labor. But nope, they told me to fix the place with real, tangible magic.

What was going through their heads? Here was an opportunity to bend the mystical forces of an alien universe to my whims, and they assumed this would teach me a lesson. Honestly, if that was how they doled out sentences, then I was gonna commit every crime on their books and probably invent a few new ones in the process.

They told me to lift the rubble into place, which took an incredible amount of concentration, and wait for Shining Armor to magically fuse it together. Simple in concept, but I kept screwing it up. Focusing on the positions of several dozen fragments was surprisingly difficult to do, since it was basically a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. My jailor steadily lost his patience, but not even that could bring my spirits down.

The thrill of casting spells was fantastic and I reveled in every moment of it. God, I hoped the novelty never wore off. What could be more enjoyable than suddenly learning you have powers? Other than getting my hands back, of course. Still though, having magic was a solid two-thirds as good as having hands. Kinda sad that the ponies took it for granted. Magic was the kind of thing that mankind dreamed about for as long as civilization existed. Just thinking about it made me fail to keep an excited laugh inside.

And suddenly, my vision was filled with pink. Ah, there it was: the one screen door on my submarine, Shining Armor and his infernal shields. "Dang it! This again?" I asked. My mirth quickly evaporated. "What'd I do now?"

The last time I tried to break out of one of those things I almost blew myself up, so I wasn't keen on trying again and he knew it. Any and all sudden movements got me put in the magical equivalent of a holding cell. Did I sneeze? Barrier. Levitate the debris too quickly? Force field. Make eye contact? Into in the freaking bubble.

We were up to, like, nine separate occasions since we began. I counted.

Hail to the King

The white unicorn walked to the front of the barrier and eyed me scrutinously for any sign of a threat. “You’re scheming,” Shining Armor accused. “Nopony smiles like that unless they’re up to something.”

I self-consciously brought a hoof to my mouth. “Because I was smiling?” Oh, right: the fangs. To anyone else, even the most innocuous smile looked like a villainous sneer. “Come on. There’s no part of that that says evil schemer.”

Shining Armor tapped forcefully on the barrier, eliciting a loud, glassy ting. “You are *such* a schemer,” the captain asserted. His caution born of savviness would’ve been appropriate in any other situation, but from my perspective he was acting paranoid to the point of absurdity. “Everypony remembers you bashing at my wife’s shield like a foal at an aquarium, but don’t think I forgot about all your traps and mind games. You can’t play yourself off as some one-note conqueror; I know you’re planning something.”

To avoid provoking them any further, I had been totally cooperative ever since my failed jailbreak. Shiny, however, refused to believe that I wasn’t biding my time to cause the apocalypse or something. In his eyes, the fact that I wasn’t doing anything terrible was proof that I was going to do something especially heinous in the near future. There was simply no shaking his personal assumptions.

In a land as colorful as Equestria, morality was startlingly black and white. Either that or Shining Armor just hated Sombra so much that he couldn’t see me as anything but a supervillain. No matter what I tried to tell him, he might as well have plugged his ears and went ‘la la la, I can’t hear you’ for the last hour or so.

“Dude, you need to relax,” I said. Shiny shot me a stern glare in response. I’d been the recipient of a lot of glares recently, thus confirming his need to chill out. Shining Armor was one step away from becoming one of those doomsday preppers, or developing an ulcer, whichever came first. “Man, are you going to keep doing this, or are you gonna let me patch up the freedom-hole?”

The captain paused to tilt his head. “Freedom hole?” he dryly asked.

“Yeah. The hole I blasted in the outer wall can’t really be called an escape tunnel, so I just made something up. Freedom-hole.”

Shining Armor refused to dignify that with a response. With a sigh, he dispelled his barrier so I could get back to work. “Let’s just get this over with.”

And we were off: lift the rocks, bunch ‘em together, and let Shiny do his thing. Over and over it went. Deviations were met with the force field, and attempts at conversation were answered with a cold ‘hrmf’ from the white unicorn. If making magic boring was at all possible, then Shining Armor was just the pony to do it.

Over the course of our repairs, I had found that increasing the number of levitated objects made things noticeably much more difficult than increasing the size or weight. It probably had something to do with splitting my attention, but lifting five one-pound rocks was exponentially harder than lifting one five-pound rock. This required experimentation.

Not receiving his next shipment to fuse together, Shiny looked back to me and groaned. “Will you please take this seriously?” His voice teemed with irritated resignation.

“I am taking this seriously,” I insisted, not that Shining Armor believed a word. The tiny model of the solar system circling my horn may have damaged my credibility slightly.

Impatient and exasperated, Shiny grunted and rubbed his eyes with a hoof. How he accomplished that I had no idea. “Just try to work faster. This is a very busy time for our country and I’m needed elsewhere.”

Despite his jumpy and distrustful disposition, I got the feeling he’d be pretty cool guy if I weren’t his archnemesis. He defined himself by his long list of duties, he jumped to the defense of his wife, and he placed his nation’s safety above his own. The whole reason we were down here instead of letting the crew that reinforced my cell do the work was to keep me occupied and away from any other ponies.

Once again, I fit a bunch of rubble into a damaged part of the wall and Shiny’s magic fixed it seamlessly, not a single crack to be found.

“How do you do that?” I asked after watching him do his wall repairing spell a few times. To alleviate the boredom I tried to segue my labor sentence into free magic lessons. My horse-magic needed work.

“Do what, the spell?” he asked. The unicorn rolled his eyes. “After everything that’s happened today, you think we’ll teach you anything?”

His words said one thing, but deep down it got him thinking. How could Sombra not know something so simple, he wondered. The dark unicorn used his magic all day, but then again, levitation was a spell that all unicorns knew by instinct. Outside of that, Sombra had done nothing past his tricks with crystals and smoke, and performed terribly at that. It was like something knocked loose his entire, vast arsenal of dark sorcery from his mind. Which begged the question, what else was forgotten?

“C’mon, what’s the harm in it? This would go a lot faster,” I mentioned leadingly.

“You certainly couldn’t go any slower,” he retorted.

He had a point. I was awful, the kind of awful that made Shiny wonder if he should take over my part of the work for the sake of expedience. It was nearly time for dinner and only two of the walls were done.

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

Shining Armor, in response, casually levitated every piece of rubble at once, made them circle around, and then dropped them back on the floor. I got the hint.

"Right, I'll try to pick up the pace." I paused and considered my options. "Hey, I got an idea. Lemme try something."

With a darkening of my horn, a sourceless shadow covered the bottom of the wall's breach. Black crystals erupted from the shade a moment later and shot upwards until they rammed into the ceiling. Through the cloud of dust it kicked up, we could see that the breach was no more. Just like that, the hole was sealed.

"There. All done," I smiled. He told me to repair the wall, and by a narrow definition of what constituted a repair, I did exactly what he asked. Crystals covered the whole breach, but my restoration was embarrassingly uneven and no effort was made to turn the natural crystalline structure in to a flat plane. Also, the dark color clashed with the rest of the room.

Shining Armor was not happy. In fact, I'd say he was categorically unsatisfied with my attempts to speed things along.

"Are you kidding me? Absolutely not." A single bolt of magic shattered my shoddy patch job back to its ruined state. He then stomped a hoof meaningfully in front of the original rubble, silently demanding that I do it right.

"Fine," I muttered disappointedly. "I was just trying to help."

"You'd better clean up your act before the princess gets here. If you think you can mess around in front of somepony who raises the sun every day, you've got another think coming." He said. It was a veiled threat disguised as a warning, but to his surprise, the invocation of Celestia flew right over my head.

"Raises the sun?" I asked doubtfully. Shiny stared at me completely unamused, so I took his word at face value. "Ha! Man, this place is nuts. You know, I actually wouldn't put it past ya."

Manual celestial motion. Why not? This dream was going out of its way to be as much of a fantasyland as possible, so anything might be true. Maybe leprechauns were a real thing. Perhaps the moon made of cheese? Did Equestria share a border with Candyland?

Baffled by my complete lack of fear, Shiny wondered how in the world I had never heard of Celestia. She was practically a force of nature in herself. That'd be like not knowing that the sky was blue or that autumn leaves were removed via stampede. Just how profound was the tyrant's amnesia? Shiny pondered the unwelcome implications. If this pony had none of his memories, then can he really be considered the King Sombra that he once knew? A chink appeared in Shining Armor. He wouldn't admit it, but my obliviousness damaged his suspicions.

The tap of hooves on the crystalline floor seemed to fill the whole palace as Cadence paced back and forth, waiting anxiously for the arrival of the other two alicorns in Equestria. She had high hopes that the sisters could impart some normalcy on this uncontrollable situation.

Also, she unabashedly hoped that her fellow princesses would arrive before it was her shift on Sombra duty.

The demands on the ruler of the Crystal Empire took a considerable toll on her psyche. She and her husband shared their burdens equally, at least on paper, but her half of the work was significantly more stressful. The reason was that Shining Armor had many years of military experience behind him, all of which applied directly to his current responsibilities. Experience, not just training; there was a considerable difference. Cadence's lack of hooves-on practice caused her to run herself ragged making sure everything ran smoothly, and throwing Sombra on the pile debilitated what little confidence she had left.

It was a private fear of hers that if she failed to bring the Empire up to speed, then Celestia would send Blueblood to take her place. With that kind of motivation, she had a fire lit under her twenty-four-seven.

"They didn't take a chariot did they?" she worried. "That would take forever." Just as the words left her mouth, thankfully, she felt the magic of her surroundings bend to the will of something powerful.

"Wretched knave, thy time is at hoof!"

A loud pop from a teleportation spell announced the arrival an even louder Princess Luna. She decked herself out in an armored version of her usual regalia, complete with a crested helmet and thick, lunar-themed barding. Her eyes burned brightly and her horn blazed an aura of blue power. The room visibly dimmed and arcs of lightning sparked around the princess of the night, as if to draw attention to the arcane might that she gathered in her horn.

"Downfall approacheth, King Sombra, weep if thou must!" she exploded with the full din of the Canterlot royal voice. Luna's battlecry exploded about the room, rattled any items not secured to the ground, and caused the windows to shake. Seemingly unaware that only Cadence was present, the living war horn continued. **"Justice shall triumph anon and evermore! For honor and glory we smite thee!"**

Not finding her prey in front of her, Luna hopped back and forth a few times, always landing in a combative stance, to check every corner of the room. **"Where art thou, miscreant!?"**

Hail to the King

As the seconds ticked away unanswered, Luna finally noticed that her declaration was not the harbinger to a grand and terrible duel. She blinked confusedly – an action ill-suited to her burning, luminescent eyes – and powered down her horn.

"Princess Mi Amore Cadenza," she shouted, **"why hath no pony challenged us? Where doth the villain..."** Stopping herself and lowering her voice to a manageable level, Luna took off her helmet and cleared her throat. "We mean, where is Sombra?"

Cadence held up a hoof to stall the conversation until the ringing in her ears subsided. A part of her was sorely tempted to keep Luna on the warpath just to be rid of the king as soon as possible, but the circumstances demanded that everypony be as calm and clear-minded as possible.

"He's here. We have him in custody."

Luna hummed neutrally. While she would never wish a fight upon anyone, she was somewhat disappointed that she didn't get to relive some of the good old days. Being from antiquity, her idea of keeping the peace involved confronting evildoers and beating the crap out of them. Much like the problem that Shining Armor faced, the idea that Equestria kept getting attacked and subsequently defended without any of her involvement irked the night princess to no end. An old-fashioned battle for the Empire's future would have been delightfully cathartic.

A second pop heralded the entrance of Celestia, who wore the same old thing she always had on. Princess Cadence brightened substantially when she heard that second teleportation spell. No offence to Luna, but the eldest alicorn stood in a league of her own.

Celestia too prepared herself to unleash a torrent of magic upon arrival, but in contrast to her gung-ho younger sibling, she clinically scanned the room before turning to Cadence questioningly.

"Is anypony hurt?" she asked.

"No," Cadence was quick to respond. "Nopony was hurt when we captured King Sombra. Even with all the damage to the city, we all got out unscathed."

Celestia breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I was so worried. In your letter, all you said was 'Danger. Help. Sombra has returned.' You didn't even sign it."

"And thou didst include a superfluous number of exclamation points," Luna added, holding up the note. "We took that to mean the situation was especially urgent."

The two of them arrived expecting to see the same scenario as last time play out. But when they didn't see Cadence's gigantic shield protecting the city, the sisters feared that they would meet Sombra lounging in the throne room surrounded by the shards of a shattered Crystal Heart. They would need to rely on Cadence to clarify what had happened.

"Yes, that was sent the moment we captured him," she explained. "Since then, some light has been shed on the problem, and the situation is somewhat more, um," she searched for a diplomatic word to explain the impossibly stupid events of the day, "peculiar," she finished. Adjectives failed her. "Shining Armor is looking after him, and Sombra... he's a bit loopy right now."

Celestia tilted her head curiously. She found it odd that Cadence was frustrated and confused, but by all appearances unafraid. "Loopy?"

"Yes. There is something terribly wrong with him, like I've never seen before. Trust me, you will see what I mean. I'll have Shiny bring him here now," she said. Her horn flashed briefly to send a magical summons to her husband.

"Escort him here?" Luna wondered. "Why is he not secured in the dungeons?"

Cadence hung her head and avoided eye contact. "There were issues," she mumbled. The jailbreak was not something she looked forward to explaining. "I'd rather not go into specifics, but we have him contained for now. Honestly, it would be best if you saw him for yourself."

"If you have him under control, then why were we summoned?"

Even though the situation was deadly serious, and calling for help from the princesses was unquestionably the best course of action, Cadence still felt like a foal having to explain how she made a mistake.

"Well, he's not so much 'under control,' as he is not currently attacking anything. I... I just don't know what to do. We should count ourselves lucky we've avoided a disaster, but as it stands he has already casted several dark magic spells, destroyed private and government property, fled from justice twice, frightened the entire city into a panic, insulted royalty, and threatened a uniformed guard. Already, that's half of the major crimes we punish, and he did them *in alphabetical order*," she huffed. "So much of this doesn't make sense, and I don't think it will no matter how I try to sort it out."

"Princess Cadence," Celestia spoke soothingly. "It's okay. We are here to help in any way we can. You have done a fantastic job so far."

"Thank you," Cadence visibly relaxed. But before she could continue, her horn blinked. "Ah, Shiny's on his way. We can meet up with them in the dining hall. The last time we questioned Sombra he revealed nothing useful, but maybe together we'll have better luck."

Celestia nodded in agreement. "That would be for the best. If Sombra still poses any kind of threat, we should all stay together in case our meeting turns sour."

"Good. I'm glad to know that we won't be alone. But before we go in there, though, there's something you need to know. It's about Sombra. He's not entirely himself."

Hail to the King

Shining Armor and I walked back to the main section of the palace. Or, more accurately, he walked while I sat there uncomfortably. The two of us had finally started to get some productive work done when his horn blinked for some reason and he told me it was time to go. Curiously, I tapped my own horn and wondered if I could set alarms on it. He said that Cadence was waiting for us, so we left the rest of the repairs undone. This, of course, meant more time in the holding-bubble.

I really hated that thing.

"I can walk, ya know." Sitting within a sphere wasn't very comfortable, especially when I wasn't used to having a tail. There really wasn't a satisfactory position I could fold myself into, and I'd been fidgeting around for the last couple minutes to no avail. Shining Armor would have to develop a more ergonomic cage if he expected me to put up with this over the long term.

"And you can also sit there," he answered to my disappointment.

"Is this going to be a thing from now on, where you just carry me around everywhere? Can you at least make it bigger so I can lounge back?"

Shiny was nothing if not patient, but everyone had their limits. I could tell by the way his ears kept swiveling. "You're going to complain the whole way, aren't you?"

"Yup," I answered without shame or hesitation.

After taking a moment of careful deliberation to weigh his options, and another to grumble a bit, he decided to let me go. I'd like to think he was being nice, but more likely he wanted to remove a future annoyance and figured it would be infeasible to lug me around everywhere. Also, it let him save his magic in case he really needed it.

The disturbing resemblance to carrying a royal palanquin may have also been a factor.

"Much better. Thanks, man." I stretched out the second I touched the floor. The aches and pops were in the strangest places on this alien body, especially since I still wasn't used to it. Imagine a full-body phantom limb, but in reverse, if that makes any sense. I was going to start walking to shake the feeling off, but Shining Armor wasn't about to give me free reign of the place.

"Eyes forward. No talking. Maintain a constant pace," he ordered, because a favor from him had more caveats than a wish from a spiteful genie. "Anything else puts you back in the force field."

"Yeah, sure dude," I said, breaking all three of his conditions at once. "So we're meeting up with Cadence, right? What'd you're wife want?"

His horn illuminated threateningly.

"...Okay, shutting up now."

I stayed quiet for the rest of the trip, which had to be a personal record for me. A few minutes later, Shining Armor brought me to a massive room with a massive table with a massive spread of food on it. It was a grand hall with decorations strung around that must've been able to seat a couple dozen guests. It reminded me of a mead hall or, less majestically, an elongated cafeteria table. Cadence was there with two other horses. They also had wings and horns, so I made a mental note that all female unicorns had wings. That wasn't important though. I had larger concerns.

As someone whose idea of decadence involved ordering outside of the dollar menu, the sight of the banquet hall instantly made my mouth water. The food shimmered in the light, but not in a way that looked glazed or covered in sugar; it was just sparkly somehow. Becoming painfully aware that I hadn't eaten anything all day, I made a beeline for the food and totally ignored the guests Cadence brought with her.

Said pony was less than pleased. "Sombra, get over here."

"Eh?" She sounded more frustrated than usual so I stopped myself. "Oh, we ain't eating yet." Reluctantly, I left the pile of food undevoured, but not before a final rapacious leer towards a particularly shiny... thing. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted it. The second Cadence was done talking, it was mine. "Okay, what do you need?"

Before I could make my way over, however, Shining Armor yanked me back by the tail to deliver a warning. Or an admonishment. They were kind of the same thing with him.

"Listen, I don't care if you want to doom yourself, but I will not tolerate any offences to the crown. Watch your language and keep yourself in line, and we won't have any problems. That mare over there is princess of all Equestria, so you'd better be the most courteous stallion she's ever met."

The horses standing beside Cadence certainly looked the part. One was much taller than the other and they both had manes that flowed in an unseen breeze. They must have been wigs, like what judges wore, because if they ever stopped flapping they'd drag along the ground. They probably used their horn-magic to make it float everywhere.

I'd worked out that Princess Cadence wasn't the top dog around here, but if her guests were part of the real royal family, then things were about to get a lot more complicated.

Wow. They really brought out the big guns on this one.

Welp, no time like the present. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I worked up as much confidence as I could and strolled right over to the giant white horse. She was easily double the size of anyone in the

room and had a horn as long as a man's forearm. Half of her face was concealed beneath a pastel rainbow of colors and her other eye was locked firmly on me. She checked me over suspiciously but didn't say a word, like she was willing to let me make the first move but wouldn't be surprised if I lashed out at her. Finally, after a moment of nervous consternation, I broke the silence between us.

"Dang, you're a big one," I said, having to crane my neck to see her eye to eye. Cadence gasped quietly and Shining Armor face-palmed hard enough to leave a bruise. "You can relax. I won't cause any trouble."

The big mare had a stately poise about her that I expected from royalty, but she wasn't about to fool me. I'd seen this joke a thousand times before; you expected to meet someone important and you made a big show of introducing yourself, but it turned out that the real person you were looking for was someone totally unexpected. Extra points if you made fun of them first. Sorry, dream, but I was one step ahead of you.

Obviously, she was the bodyguard.

Walking right past the huge white horse, I sauntered over to the shorter blue one. "So you must be the princess I've been hearing about."

She barely waited for me to finish talking before she shouted right in my face.

"Indeed!" the night princess boomed. Luna spread her wings and puffed out her chest, doing a marvelous job of looking down her nose at me. It might have been silly to feel threatened by pony, but I was now acutely aware of her full battle-dress. **"We are Luna, princess of the moon and stars! By Our right as co-sovereign of Equestria, we demand thou yieldeth to Us at once!"**

Mother of God, it can't be emphasized enough how much that hurt my ears. This pony could challenge her own echo to a shouting match and win. Recovering from her explosive declaration, I ruffled my hair back into place and answered. "Uh, sure. I yield."

Princess Luna ignited her horn and began to float into the air – not fly, since her wings were still splayed aggressively. **"Then be routed beneath the full onslaught of Equestria's** - Wait, what?" she landed back on her hooves and canceled the light show. Apparently, the night princess didn't think it would be this easy.

To make sure she got the hint I sat down and put my forelegs up in a surrendering motion.

"Oh, um... then **Huzzah**!" crowed the mare with no indoor voice. She yelled just as loud as before, but it was obvious she was just trying to save face. **"Victory hath been achieved through diplomatic means! A wise decision, villain!"** Then, to my surprise, she visibly deflated and pointed to her bodyguard. "Alas, if peace is thy desire, we suspect 'tis our sister thou wishest to address."

"Our sister?" I wondered out loud.

Cadence instantly stepped in and shoved me towards the towering white mare. “No, you aren’t related to them; that’s just how she talks. Now go speak with Celestia.” Noticing the confused and slightly disturbed glances she received from her guests, Cadence groaned tiredly. “I’ll explain later.”

“Fine. Fine,” I submitted. Walking up to the bigger horse, I tried to position myself so I could see whatever horrible facial disfigurement she kept hidden under that hair. I bet she had an eyepatch. “Your name’s Celestial, right? What’s good?”

Cadence grabbed me by the ear. “She is *Princess* Celestia.” She stressed the title so strongly that she practically hissed. “Show some respect.”

I looked to Cadence with eyes half-lidded. “Of course.” Another princess. Alright, that made what, three total now? All in the same room? Okay, brain, you won. I promised that the second I woke up, I’d try to get in touch with my feminine side. But please, I’m begging you, *stop it with the princesses already*.

“Is there anyone here who isn’t royalty?” Ambling back to the entrance, I got right up to one of the guards’ face. “How ‘bout you? Are you secretly a duke, or something?”

Before the guard could break his stony vigil, Shining Armor came over and pushed me towards the apparent princess. His surprisingly sharp horn made an effective prod. “Cut that out. We have a lot of things we need to tell the princesses, and I’m sick of you clowning around.”

That he didn’t say ‘horsing around’ made the universe a little less bright. It was amazing how fast they shifted to treating me like a harmless annoyance. Just a few hours ago, it was like I was a walking atom bomb. At this rate, I gave it a week before they saw me as little more than a slacker roommate who refused to pay rent.

“Listen,” Shining Armor continued. “She isn’t just a princess. Celestia is the single highest authority in all of Equestria. Her word is law and your fate is in her hooves.”

I stopped in place, looked to Celestia, and then back to Shiny with worry evident on my face. “… For real? So, like, she’s the boss around here?”

Shiny nodded.

“And you have actual royalty, not just harmless old people who don’t do anything?” I asked. Shining Armor scowled, which was something I’d seen enough times to recognize as his serious face. Uh-oh.

Like the icy sobriety of seeing a cop in one’s rear-view mirror, all my good humor died. In all likelihood, I had just incited law against me.

Again.

Hail to the King

"I am so sorry!" I rushed up to the white horse – the other white horse – to make amends. Jesus, could I have just one introduction where I didn't make a fool of myself? Crap. Oooooh crap. There had to be some way to mitigate this before it joined the long, winding conga line of humiliations I'd suffered today.

"Hi, princess, we got off on the wrong foot. I mean foreleg… hoof. Let's just start over." Okay, princesses were vain, right? Thinking fast, and putting on the most transparently fake smile ever, I tried to find something about her to compliment. "The name's Sombra. You, um… you have hair like George Clinton!" I blurted. "I really like your mane. Very psychedelic."

Well… that just happened. Why do I do these things to myself?

As was typical, no one knew how to respond to the things I said. You know what I learned today? I learned that I was rock-effing stupid. Stifling the urge to bash my head against the table, I hid my face beneath a hoof. Christ, I needed to learn when to shut up.

The princess, as expected, was the very face of suppressed, irritated confusion. "Thank you," she stated without any inflection at all.

Woo. Crisis averted.

Celestia mouthed 'loopy?' to Cadence, who nodded her head in confirmation. The white mare then put on a neutral expression and spoke to me in a way that exuded superiority without crossing into condescension. "King Sombra, as I'm sure you have already guessed, your return to these lands is a delicate subject, and we have a number of questions we need you to resolve. From this point onward I need you to be honest, serious, and forthright. This matter will most certainly incite passions throughout the Emp-"

Loudly clearing her throat, Cadence grabbed Celestia's attention. She motioned for her to come closer, so the taller princess lowered her head to let the pink mare whisper something in her ear.

"Truly? Not even that much?" Celestia sounded surprised. Any further conversation was inaudible from my end.

That interruption finished, Celestia stood up to resume her talk with me as if nothing had happened. "As I said, your reappearance will awaken many traumatic memories for the ponies of this city. In the interest of fairness, I am going to offer you a chance to explain yourself, your motivations, and whatever plans you may possess. Can I trust you to answer us to the best of your ability?"

"Yeah, sure," I shrugged. No skin off my back. Despite embarrassing myself far, far too often, I had high hopes for this one. See seemed a lot more tolerant than the others.

"Excellent," she said. "Then have a seat."

And with that said we all prepared for what was sure to be a wonderful dinner with absolutely no awkwardness or misunderstandings at all.

"Great," I chirped. "I'm so hungry I could eat a hor-*rrrmph*." My mind worked faster than my mouth and I stuffed a bread roll into my muzzle before I could finish my sentence. That didn't count. It did not count. I stopped myself. See, I was getting better at this.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Nuhfnng."

Dinner started out uneventfully. Celestia didn't even touch her food before asking her first questions, but they were all basic stuff like 'what are you doing here' and 'what are you planning.' But, because my responses were just 'I don't know' repeated ad nauseam, I offered them no answers or help whatsoever. They weren't sure if that was good news or bad news.

On my end, the most important revelation of the day was that my horn could just telekinetically grab what I wanted from the table without having to ask for it. That changed my earlier opinion: magic was now three-fourths as good as having hands. Over the course of the meal, though, I discovered that it was considered rude to just levitate stuff straight into my mouth. It seemed arbitrary to me, because I was never actually touching it, but I had to magically use a use the utensils to pick things up instead of just taking it straight from the plate. Fruit, bread, or other finger-food was fine, but they looked at me funny when I floated a long river of nectar out of my cup and into my mouth.

Conversation died down once they realized I had no answers to give, so when the silence stretched out too far I took the initiative to start asking about whatever happened to be on my mind.

"So... uh, Celestia. I have to ask. Why do you make your hair go all flowy like that?" I pointed at her mane.

"Hmm?" Blinking, she fluffed her mane as if this was her first time ever seeing it, and a second later the whole mass sagged completely limp. I stifled a laugh to avoid grief from Shining Armor. Apparently, making it flutter around was the sort of thing that was so natural for her that she didn't even notice she was doing it. If I had to guess, asking that question was the unicorn equivalent of making people aware of their blinking patterns, or that their tongues couldn't find a comfortable position in their mouths.

A glow of her horn later and her hair flowed again, but it was less fluid and took conscious effort. "It's so it doesn't touch the floor," Celestia responded as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I nodded sagely. Totally called that one.

As if afraid of losing control of the situation, the princess quickly brought things back to more serious topics. “King Sombra,” Celestia began. “I understand that you have suffered some recent memory loss. I am not sure if you are aware of this, but we have some prior history. Do you know who I am?”

“Aw gaut shom. Ahem.” I had to pause to choke down a mouthful. “I got some info from Shining Armor, but nope. Never met’cha before today. Also, I don’t have memory loss. I’m just not the guy you think I am,” I responded. She nodded, humoring me but not really believing. “Oh. And before I forget to ask, Shining Armor told me you raise the sun. How does that work? Is that more unicorn magic, or do you just – I don’t know – chuck it up there like a shotput?”

I swore I saw a faint glint of amusement in Celestia’s one visible eye. Luna, however, took it as an insult.

“Hast thou no decorum at all?” the princess of the night snorted. “Thy manners certainly hint at it.”

“I’m just asking,” I shrugged. “With mythology like that, you can never tell what’s a metaphor and what’s supposed to be taken at face value.”

Maybe Celestia used the sun as a symbol of her office. Or maybe she was responsible for the solar equivalent of winding the clock every day. For all I knew, she could’ve been the physical avatar of the sun itself. Or... uh-oh, maybe she raised the sun the same way the Aztecs did. Celestia didn’t seem the type to gore out a still-beating heart, but I proved myself a poor judge of character lately. Anything was possible.

“Myth? Thou doubtest Our sister’s power?” Luna turned to Shining Armor and Cadence to silently ask what was up with this guy. They shrugged in unison.

“It’s not so much doubt, per se. I’m just having trouble imagining it.” I scratched the back of my head. “I get the feeling this is gonna start an argument, so let’s talk about something else. Cadence let it slip that I’m supposed to be ruling a place called the Crystal Empire. Any idea where that might be?”

Shining Armor, making absolutely certain to show no outward signs of worry, swallowed a bite of his dinner before answering me. “Never heard of it,” he said. The prince then quietly signaled for his guards to take down the obvious Crystal Empire banners strung up in the banquet hall. “You really shouldn’t jump to conclusions like that.”

“Shoot,” I said to myself. “This dream really isn’t making things easy for me.”

It was then that Celestia belatedly noticed what had gone wrong with this whole situation. “Not to interrupt, but aren’t we the ones asking the questions?” she pointed out.

"Yes we were," Cadence groaned. "This happened before. He has a way of flipping the tables on you with asinine babbling. I honestly don't know if it's intentional or not."

"It's not asinine…" I felt a little insulted.

"Yes it is!" she asserted. "I swear, everything you say is ignorant or just plain dumb. Back in your cell you spent a whole twenty minutes asking why Shining Armor's magic is pink while mine is blue when, and I quote, 'it should be the other way around.'"

"And I'm right!" I argued with a surprising amount of vigor. "Just look at the two of you. You're pink, and he's got blue hair. It fits! How are you not getting this?" The others assumed correctly that we had spent way too much time on the subject.

"You don't know anything about magic!" She pounded a hoof on the table.

"My horn is bigger!" I snapped right back.

To prevent us from devolving into childish bickering – a bit too late, but the thought counted – Shining Armor spoke up. "Honey, don't let him get to you." He offered her a glass of water, which she downed all at once.

"Thank you. I'm sorry, Shiny, but he really brings out the worst in me," she said, giving me the evil eye.

Luna had been staring at me thoughtfully for a few minutes and had an idea. "If he is going to talk anyway, We propose he be allowed to ask his questions. It should let us see the extent of his memory loss."

"For the last time, I don't have amnesia," I insisted. "I told you, I'm not Sombra. I just really, really look like him." No, that wasn't quite right. "Or… uh… well, yeah I'm him, but not really. It's, like… think of this as a long-term possession. Have you ever had a project that someone else took over, and they went in a completely different direction than what you would have done? It's like that, but with life."

Luna planted her pony-elbow-analogue on the table and rested her head on a hoof, looking to me with the unamused skepticism of a parent who caught a child in an obvious lie.

"And what direction hast thou planned for thyself?"

Pausing from the food, I circled a hoof in the air searchingly while I gave it some deep thought. "Hmm. Dunno," I came up blank. "Just not evil. Other than that, I don't have any plans."

"Alas, we have returned to where this all began," she bemoaned. "In the interest of determining more about thee beyond, as thou eloquently phrased, 'dunno,' we again propose that thou continuest asking questions of us, that we may learn of thy state of mind if only by indirect means."

"Awesome," I agreed before anyone had a chance to differ. "Because there's something that's been bugging me for a while now. We've got a prince, a princess, a princess, and another, much larger princess." I pointed to each one individually. "Is there a king? Other than me, I guess. Or queen, more likely."

Everyone shifted awkwardly. A couple of the ponies returned to their food so they wouldn't have to speak. There must have been some elephant in the room that no one wanted to address.

Celestia, seeing that no one was going to tackle this question, was the first to speak up. "We have no queen. Nopony, not since the founding of Equestria, has ever laid claim to those titles."

"Really?" I asked. "Why's that?" If she was queen in everything but name, then why not go ahead and seize the title? That seemed so pointless to me.

"You," Luna, pausing from her meal, answered harshly. "Thou, specifically, art the reason nopony would dare to use the titles of King and Queen. Our sister would hold that office, had it not been irreparably tainted by thine influence. Chrysalis comes to mind, and she too paid for her arrogance. King and Queen are forevermore the labels of tyrants and invaders."

Oh. I felt my ears flatten against my head. Even though I personally had nothing to do with it, they were still – in a manner of speaking – talking about me, so I couldn't help but feel some sense of guilt.

"... Sheesh, he was that bad, huh?" I mumbled quietly before thinking about the implications of her explanation. "Oh! That means you know stuff about me, right? While we're on the subject, can anyone tell me who I am?" I pointed at my head and moved my hoof up and down to indicate myself. "I mean, who I was before I was me?"

"Pardon?" asked Celestia. She didn't expect the memory loss to reach that extent.

"No one's told me the story about this Sombra guy. Heck, I only learned the name by overhearing it. Everyone either refuses to tell me or quickly changes the subject. Asking Shining Armor and Cadence was useless, even after trying over and over again all afternoon. I mean, not to beat a dead horse, but-"

Luna spat out her entire drink. Coughing a few times and making a huge mess of herself, she glared at me in horrified disgust. ***"WHAT!?"***

Mouth, brain, why couldn't the two of you just get along?

"Er, right. Poor choice of words. You guys definitely wouldn't have that expression."

"Expression?!" she squawked. "What hast thou done, where such a thing was common enough to become an idiom?"

Taken aback for a moment, I wondered why they thought I was the one who went around smacking corpses. Realization, however, was pretty much instantaneous and it made me face-whatever-the-bottom-of-a-hoof-was-called.

Crap, they must've thought I was talking about Equestria-ponies.

"Wait! I can explain." I fervently motioned for Luna to sit back down. "Sorry, I keep forgetting not to mix you up with the other kind of pony. This sort of thing will probably come up again, so I'm going stop it right now before we have any more misunderstandings." I spoke as slowly and definitively as I could. "To make things perfectly clear, I was talking about Earth-ponies. You don't have to worry about them. None of what I said applies to you."

Luna would have done another spit take if she was drinking anything so she settled for a disturbed gagging sound. Before she could explode, however, Shining Armor piped up. "Hold it. I heard some of this second-hoof and I need you to clarify things for me. Back when you were talking with Cadence, what was it you said about earth ponies?"

"You mean back in the cell? I don't think I talked about Earth-ponies to Cadence," I answered. Thinking back to the interrogation, however, a single offhand remark came to mind. "Oh! Wait. Yeah, I did mention it once," I laughed and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, they're nothing like you."

"If you could elaborate for us, that would be very helpful," he led me along.

No surprise they were curious about that. I already explained to Cadence that humans were the only intelligent beings on Earth, but they probably had trouble coming to grips with the reverse-Gulliver's Travels scenario I laid out for them.

"There's not much to say about Earth-ponies. They're just big, simple, domesticated animals we use to work our farms: basically, a tractor made out of meat. They're useful for all kinds of manual labor and a lot of people treat them like pets. I never dealt with one myself, and it never appealed to me because A, I've never been on a farm, and B, I just don't have the heart to whip 'em when they start acting up. Besides, I lived in the city. No one in their right mind would bring them into a busy urban environment. It may be a hard pill for you to swallow, but Earth-ponies aren't people. They're brainless. I can't even picture an Earth-pony having a job or going to school. They'd probably stink up the whole town."

The audience of royals was stunned to immobility. Over the course of the explanation, both Luna and Shining Armor had dropped their silverware. They had some idea about Sombra's opinions on earth ponies, but this casual bigotry was so much worse than they could have possibly imagined. And I still wasn't done. Let it be known that no one in existence dug his grave deeper or more enthusiastically than me. Gloriously oblivious to the growing hostility, I batted the Sword of Damocles like a birthday piñata.

"I mean, all they do is eat, plow, poop, and run around, probably stepping in the aforementioned poo while they do it. They're animals. You really can't mention them in the same sentence as any of you." I pointed to them indicatively. It was supposed to mean Equestrians in general, but they assumed I meant unicorns specifically. "You're civilized. There's just no comparison."

I nodded satisfactorily. There. That ought to set things straight.

Celestia's mouth hung open in profound, abject horror and the eye that wasn't hidden behind her hair shrank to the size of the period at the end of this sentence. "W-whip?" she stammered. The implications sickened her. Was that the kind of thing that happened during his reign, she wondered. He denied them education and segregated the populace!? And *beat* them!? By all she held sacred, such horrors could not be allowed to pass. In her mind, if Sombra held those kinds of attitudes, then he truly was beyond redemption.

And once again I proved myself incapable of taking a hint.

"Relax, they're just livestock," I helpfully clarified. This, of course, accidentally confirmed her fears. "And like any animal, you gotta show 'em who's boss before they're put to work."

I found to my confusion that no one took comfort in my words. The pink under-princess looked especially shaken up.

"See!" She shot to her hooves and pointed to me as if I'd just confessed to witchcraft. "This! This is what I was afraid of. This is why he needs to go back in the ice!"

Celestia shook herself out of her horrified stupor. "I... I can't. He hasn't done anything yet," the highest princess sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Those were definitely offenses worthy of banishment, but she made it policy to never throw the first punch. Celestia was the type that couldn't in good conscience resort to violence unless it was explicitly in self-defense. She would have no problem defeating Sombra if need be – in fact, the fight would be over in the blink of an eye – but as someone who preached harmony as the central tenant to her rule and way of life, she would do a tremendous, hypocritical disservice to herself by striking preemptively.

"No, Princess," Shining Armor cut her off – actually interrupted Princess Celestia herself – as he lost the last bit of his tolerance and understanding. "He just said 'earth ponies aren't people,' like, a second ago. There is nothing ambiguous about that. He needs to go."

Cadence backed him up. "Shiny's right. It's only a matter of time before he backs up his words with action. This may be the start of his real personality seeping through. Everypony in the Empire is in danger!"

The white alicorn hesitated in her response. "I..." her mind raced for another solution but came up with nothing. "I suppose you're right," she exhaled sadly. "There is simply too much at risk to take chances." Agreeing, but sounding depressed at the thought, Celestia had hoped that once – just once –

she could solve a conflict without banishing it, sealing it away for generations, or blowing it up. Not to mention the ethical issues of striking down an undeniably insane individual without a trial. The fact that really twisted the knife was that she knew history would remember this day as a clear-cut victory for justice. With heavy reluctance, her horn took its golden glow.

But then I put my foot right in it. For once, luckily, it worked in my favor.

"Jeez, what's with all these reactions?" I wondered aloud between bites of some unknown, hay-based horse-food. When they said 'back in the ice' I assumed they meant kicking me out of the city and into the snow outside. That just meant I'd find another town and start this whole thing all over. No worries. "I told ya, I'm not talking about you. Not unicorns, not whatever you three are, and not even the sparkly dudes outside. Earth ponies," I stressed. "Ponies from Earth."

Celestia let the magic in her horn disperse. "From... Earth?" The gears in her head spun rapidly. "Wait a moment, you two," she silenced whatever yelling Shiny and Cadence were about to do with a single wave of her hoof. At long last, someone finally noticed our problems with capitalization.

"Earth," she reiterated. Only the fact that Earth was a name proposed for Equestria made her realize our mistake, and therefore stopped her from banishing me into the nuclear heart of the sun. "Can I assume that 'Earth' is the name of a place?"

The room became eerily quiet, but it was such a basic question that I answered without a hint of nervousness. "Yeah, that's where I'm from. What, Cadence didn't fill you in on anything?"

Reluctant to admit that such an enormous misunderstanding could result from something so foolish, she pressed me for details. "Where you are from..." she repeated thoughtfully. "In truth, I find it rather unbelievable. Perhaps I am simply grasping for any reason to find a peaceful solution, but please, tell me exactly what you mean by 'Earth.'"

"Like I said, it's where I'm from; Earth is a whole other planet. It's kind of like here, but dim the colors a bit and make the buildings taller. Also, cars. There're lots of cars."

Totally unconvinced by my words, Celestia narrowed her eyes. "Every time you lie to me is another century of banishment," she threatened.

That made me stop eating. Specifying a century seemed like overkill. Why not just make it lifetime? Celestia wasn't screwing around. "I ain't lying. Just ask Cadence. She had, like, this crystal that buzzed when you didn't tell the truth. Actually, yeah. Let's bring that rock back out. It'll show you."

Still cautious, but feeling somewhat permissive thanks to the absolute certainty she heard in my voice, Celestia hummed anxiously and moved to stand directly in front of me.

"There is no need," she dismissed. Celestia stared right into my eyes and her horn took on a faint, yellowish glow. "For centuries, I've dealt with an endless stream of slanderous courtiers and every

brownnoser in Canterlot. I've long ago learned to see past their deceptions. If you are lying, I'll know," she firmly stated. "Now swear to me that everything you said was true."

"All of it," I complied without hesitation.

Celestia, for her part, detected no trace of trickery. "And 'earth ponies are animals,'" she pursued. "Enlighten us." This was the real cornerstone of her suspicions. Because no part of Equestria had ever been named Earth, she believed there was a good chance that most, if not all, of the dark pony's memories were fabricated. Whether or not Sombra gets banished depended on those speciest comments being part of the fictional creation of a diseased mind. Hoping for a sensible excuse, but not actually expecting any exonerating details, she waited to see if I could climb my way out of the hole I dug for myself.

I responded immediately. "I meant that literally. Sure, they're smarter than most animals – at least, smart enough to be trained to do stuff – but they aren't, uh... hmm. I want to say 'human,' but that doesn't really apply here. They don't talk or think. They're not, um.... God, what's the word." It was probably the stress from being grilled like this, but I was brain-farting so hard I could actually hear it. "Sapient! That's the word I'm looking for. Ponies aren't sapient. None of them are."

Again, I told no lies.

It wasn't often that something rendered Celestia speechless. "... but... you're..." She even glanced around to the others in the room, as if comparing them to me to confirm that yes, the pony in front of her really was a pony. I gave her an answer, technically, but for all the sense it made, it might as well have been one of those paradoxes you say to make robots explode.

Luckily, Cadence had already dealt with this insanity and was happy to help.

"It's part of his delusion. He thinks he's a gorilla."

A few seconds passed. Celestia blinked, raised her hoof as if she had something to say, and then put it back down to mull things over. "You... failed to mention that."

The pink alicorn closed her eyes and massaged her temples. "Humans. They're from the future, or something." She seemed embarrassed to say the words aloud. "That's not the important part. It doesn't matter *what* is in Sombra's delusion, the problem is that he has one in the first place. The whole thing took a backseat to him insisting that the world is a dream."

She had told the princesses that Sombra was seemingly insane, had lost his memory, and had developed an entirely new personality, but not much else. An outside observer might call this a tremendous oversight, but from her perspective that whole 'human' matter was just icing on the crazy-cake, an inconsequential detail to a much grander issue. So, when she summarized events for Celestia, that inconsequential detail got axed.

Equestria's highest princess pieced together the new information. "Then there is a chance that everything he mentioned up until this point was all in his head? Those things he said were imaginings of his fanciful human-world, not memories of past actions?"

Cadence nodded tiredly. "He doesn't even know what country he's in."

Shocking everyone present, Celestia put her whole body into a sigh of palpable relief and even put a hoof to her chest to quell her beating heart. "Oh, thank goodness," she laughed, but it was a stressed and jittery thing. "Phew... Okay, Luna, you can stop now."

Raising an eyebrow at Celestia's seeming non-sequitur, I looked to the night princess's seat and found that it was empty. "Luna? Hey, where'd she go? She was here just a second ag- *WOAH*!"

I turned around to see, just inches away from my face, Princess Luna charging up the granddaddy of all magical attacks. Her back, neck, and legs were ramrod straight, essentially turning her into a pony-shaped artillery cannon. Motes of light gathered at the base of her horn, aggregating and brightening until a pint sized nova appeared atop her head. She closed her eyes, perhaps because the light was too bright even for her to handle, or because she didn't want to see the results of the imminent, point-blank annihilation she was about to wreak.

"Jesus Christ, put that away!" I pushed Luna's chin upward so her horn pointed to the ceiling. "What is wrong with you!?" I scowled to Cadence and Shining Armor. "Another one! That makes three; there is now a majority of people in this room who've tried to kill me. Good God, just... just give me second. Wow. You ponies are all about killing, aren't you?"

While the ponies bristled at my sweeping generalizations, Luna powered down her horn and was none too happy about me manhandling her jaw. She tried to wiggle her way out, but there was no frigging way I'd let her point her horn at anything but the ceiling.

"Release Us at once!"

Celestia stood up to make sure things didn't get out of control. "Sombra, you must understand that-"

"A second!" A dark grey hoof cut her off. Celestia hadn't been shushed in decades, but today was a day for new frontiers so why stop now? The ponies obligingly kept quiet while I wiped the sweat from my brow and took several deep breaths.

"Alright," I began. "Let's start over. From now on we're gonna be civil. Just simmer quietly if you vote we all be civil."

Shining Armor, Cadence, and Luna all simmered quietly.

"Perfect," I let go of Luna as a peace offering. Celestia, satisfied that I was a total nutcase instead of a complete monster, happily retook her seat. "Now we're gonna stay that way. No more rash decisions. We'll all be calm and collected. You got that, ponyone?"

"Everypony," Shining Armor corrected.

"Yeah, that." Trying to give him a thumbs-up only resulted in me pointing at him. "So," I tapped a hoof on the table. "We good? We'd better be. You know, for figments of my own imagination, you guys really don't like me that much."

The ponies nearly winced at the speed in which I brought us all back to square one.

"Are we still on this?" Cadence said groggily. That mare had reached her wit's end a long, long time ago: an impressive feat for a single afternoon. "Sombra, no matter how strongly you deny it, this is not a dream."

"Says the talking horse-princess." I rolled my eyes. "You know what? I think it's time to put this issue to bed once and for all. I am a human, ponies can't talk, and none of this is real. I thought I explained this well enough already, but I guess you're more of a visual learner."

Despite repeating myself several times they just didn't get it, so I grabbed a little something to make a more drastic demonstration. Everyone gasped when I slapped my foreleg flat against the table and magically commanded a knife to fly just above my limb, blade pointed downward like a poor man's guillotine.

"Sombra, put the knife down!" Cadence demanded. Turning to her husband, she shot him a panicky look. "Why did we give him a knife?"

"It's a butter knife," he shrugged bewilderedly. "We didn't think it'd be a problem."

"It's okay, it's okay. Relax. If you'd just let me demonstrate, you'd all understand. I'm gonna prove to you, once and for all, that this is a dream. Nothing hurts me. Watch," I said with supreme confidence. Then, to everyone's horror, the knife slammed downward into my foreleg.

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Was there a word that meant the opposite of 'eureka?' Something appropriate for those times when deep-seated presuppositions come crashing down violently. I had yet to feel any significant pain during my stay in Equestria thanks to a long chain of dumb luck combined with the ponies' reluctance to kill me. I dodged all but the weakest of Shining Armor's attacks, that shock collar was tingly at best,

and blowing myself up only made my ears ring. All of that failed to do me harm, but this knife performed its knifey mission to the letter.

I just stabbed myself to the bone. The ponies stared at it wide-eyed with their mouths slightly ajar.

Once several moments of stunned inactivity passed, Cadence was the first to speak up. "Um... Sombra, are you oka-"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" My scream made the whole room flinch.

Wildly flailing my leg around did nothing to dislodge the knife. No, I was not okay! Why would she even ask that!? Blood gushed all over the place, spraying everything like a red, gory lawn sprinkler. "AAAAAAHH! AAAAAAHH! AAAAAAAAAHHHHH! GET IT OUT!"

I fell to the floor and began racing erratically around the table using only three legs, inundating the floor with more splattered blood than a kitschy horror flick. Let it never be said that I handled pressure with any semblance of grace.

"GET IT OUT! GET-IT-OUT! GETITOUT-GETITOUT-GETITOUT-GETITOUT! AAAAAAAHHH!" I shrieked. "Why isn't anyone helping me?!"

To the ponies' credit, they were trying to do just that. Shiny dove after me while Cadence struggled right behind him to get a lock on me with her levitation spells. The problem was that they couldn't catch me while I dashed around the room like a chicken with its head cut off. Luna seemed to want to assist, but hesitation glued her to her seat and she looked to her sister as if asking for permission to intervene.

Celestia, on the other hand, just sat back to watch how this all played out.

"Sombra, stop running!" yelled Shining Armor after an unsuccessful tackle.

"IT WON'T COME OUT! IT'S STUCK THERE FOREVER!" By now I had baptized the entire room, ceiling included, with little droplets of my blood.

"If you'd stop struggling, I could – Ow!" Princess Cadence got punched right in the lip by my madly floundering hoof. The impact drove the butter knife a little further in.

"OOOOWW! OH GOD, IT'S SO MUCH WORSE BECAUSE IT'S DULL!"

While Shining Armor redoubled his efforts, Luna, no longer willing to tolerate whatever the heck this was, stood up and ignited her horn. **"Halt!"**

An indigo outline shone around me and suddenly I was weightless. Still running in place, I floated a couple of inches above the ground. This meant I was stationary long enough for Shining Armor to tackle me from a full gallop.

Hail to the King

"OOF!" a unicorn bellowed painfully from the collision. That was Shiny. Apparently, Luna overdid it on the levitation spell, so instead of taking me down to the floor, he smacked into me like a bird into a clean window.

"Captain!" Luna gasped in shock. In her surprise, the levitation cut out and I fell to the floor.

"OOF!" Same sound, but it was me that time. My adrenaline faded now that there'd been a lull in the action, so my panic subsided and I could stop screaming in all caps. As both Luna and Cadence rushed to the captain to see if he was okay, I was left whimpering pathetically on the floor.

"Owwwww-wow-wow," I whined, cradling my injured foreleg protectively. Though it was little condolence, the butter knife dislodged from one of the impacts. "Oh my God, that hurt so much!"

"Well, yeah," said Cadence forcefully as she hoisted Shining Armor back to his feet. Her voice hadn't decided if it was supposed to be angry, appalled, or taken aback.

"No, no, you don't understand. That *HURT*. Like, with actual pain."

I received no pity at all from the assembled horses. Shining Armor was the least sympathetic. He had a grueling time coming to terms with the fact that, yeah, all this did just happen, but more importantly he was royally ticked off that I socked his wife in the jaw. "What did you expect? You stabbed yourself in the fetlock!"

"I don't know what that is!"

He pointed at my pony-wrist. "See the gushing hole in your leg? That's where your fetlock is."

"But I can't be hurt!" I insisted in futile denial. "This is all a dream. You can't feel pain in a dream!"

Princess Cadence tried to instill some sense of levelheadedness on this wild and idiotic mess. "Sombra, that is what we have been trying to say this whole time," she said as reassuringly as she was able. "I'm sure this is very difficult for you, but you need to come to terms with this."

A full body shiver signified my encroaching fear.

"Nope. No, no, no, no, no. That can't possibly be right. That- But, that would mean all of this..." I stepped up to Shining Armor, got really, uncomfortably close, and stared directly into his eyes. Understandably creeped out, he backed away, but I followed him for every step.

"What are you doing? What is this?"

Slowly and scientifically, I poked him in the face to prove that he was really there. I was half expecting my leg to pass straight through him like a hologram, but I had no such luck. The prodding continued, each time more forcefully just to be sure, but Shining Armor's head remained obstinately solid.

"This is happening. Jesus Christ, this is really happening." My face paled from equal parts disbelief and significant blood loss. I kept bopping him harder and harder to prove the universe wrong.

Bap. Bap! Smack!

"Sombra!" Shining Armor yelled. I was pretty much punching him in the face at this point. Every hit smacked audibly in the dead silent banquet hall. "Stop that right now!" Losing his patience, he grabbed my hoof and planted it firmly on the ground. "What's wrong with you?"

The sensation of touch, the reaction to my prodding, and the continuous throbbing of my leg led me to one inescapable conclusion.

"You're real," I whispered. "Holy crap this is all real! This whole time! You!" I rushed up to Cadence and pointed an accusatory hoof. "Are you real too?!"

"Sombra, I think you need to lie down." She tried to calm me, but composure had been tossed out the window a long time ago. Mushing her face between my hooves, my eyes bulged as I pressed my forehead against hers, practically headbutting the mare in the process.

"Yes or no! Answer the question!"

Cadence carefully chose her words so as not to provoke a violent response. "Yes. Everypony you have spoken to, and everything you have seen or done, was not a dream. All of it was real."

I unceremoniously dropped the princess on the floor and shuffled back a few steps, never breaking eye contact. "Impossible. Then explain all the weird, magical horsiness that's been happening today!"

"Other than you?" quipped Shining Armor while he helped is wife off the floor. Cadence mouthed 'horsiness' in confusion.

"Yes! Everything's crazy but me!" I screamed crazily. "Talking horses, functional magic, *glittery food!* I am a paragon of rationality compared to you! Just look around!" Stubbornly denying the undeniable, I searched for one of Equestria's many, many impossibilities to shove in their faces. It didn't take long. "All the guards are identical!"

They looked at me like I grew an extra head. Even knowing that I claimed to be an alien, there were just some things they couldn't imagine not taking for granted. Shining Armor was the first to pick up on what was going on, and so was the first to answer.

"An enchantment is put on the armor to give them identical appearances. The illusion is dispelled once it's all taken off, but when they're on duty it's part of the uniform," he said.

"Enchantment?" My head snapped toward him at whiplash-inducing speed. He found my predacious grin unsettling enough to step backwards: a terrible decision because I instinctively advanced

on him. “A-ha! The magic! By definition magic can’t be explained.” I had ‘em now. “You can’t just say ‘it’s magic’ like that’s a satisfying answer.”

Cadence addressed that one. “Yes we can. There is an entire library on magic right here in the palace, and every major city has an academy dedicated to it. Magic is a vast field of study with thousands of years of history and progress.”

My eye twitched.

“Forks!”

The prince clenched his teeth. “I told you to watch your language.”

“No, this.” I grabbed a salad fork from the table – incidentally, the one Celestia was using at the time – and held it out for them to see. “You thumbless mutants can’t grip anything! How’d you even invent this stuff?”

They gave me a generous eight to ten seconds to notice that the fork was manifestly being held by my hoof. With a disturbingly horse-like snort of frustration, I tossed that thing behind my back for its betrayal.

“Yeah, well,” I searched around fearfully and with a lot less confidence. “What about this?” Spitting on the concept of personal space, I zipped over to Princess Luna’s side and spread one of her wings demonstrably. “How can a horse hope to fly with these puny, impotent, tiny, little wings?” Luna’s expression darkened with each adjective.

If the princess of the night had to talk to me right now she’d probably bite my head off, so her sister chose to answer that one. “It’s magic.” Celestia poured herself a cup of tea to hide her beautifully self-aware smirk. She must’ve been upset that I stole her fork. “You didn’t think our wings were aerodynamic on their own, did you?”

Stopping there would have been an exceedingly wise decision. Everypony, save possibly Celestia, was jumpy, scarred, and more than capable of holding their own in a fight. But even after I’d personally insulted *all* of the most powerful beings in Equestria, I just kept shooting myself in the foot. Metaphorically, that poor foot was already a misty splattering of chili, but hindsight only works after the fact so I opened fire.

I had one final position to fall back upon. One last linchpin in my argument remained to show them all the truth.

“Her!” I shouted. Jumping on top of the table, I shoved my hoof centimeters away from the rainbow-maned princess’s nose. “She’s like twice as big as the rest of you. I mean, where – outside of ant hills and high schools – is there a single, giant individual that gets to rule over everyone else? That ain’t

normal!" Making darn sure Cadence knew I was right, I seized Celestia's head between two hooves and thrust it towards the pink mare. "See this? Really soak it in, Cadence. ***Look at this fatty***!"

Half the room had a synchronized heart attack. Celestia, to her credit, showed no outward signs of irritation. Not wanting to light a powder keg, Cadence ran damage control as best as she could.

"Celestia isn't... you- I... No!" Her brain ragequit on her. Hey, I never said she was up to the task. The Crystal Princess, one comment away from ripping out her own mane, opened her mouth a few times before any sound could come out. This was the last straw. If looks could kill, then Cadence's face would have exterminated all life in Equestria. "Moon!" she screamed. She looked straight at Celestia and pointed at me. "Send him to the moon!"

In the back of my mind I knew my behavior was inexcusable, but a haze of angry denial clouded my thoughts. Later on, I'd be hammered with guilt for this, but, like I said, rational decision-making failed me at the moment.

Now, given that I just assaulted royalty right in front of the pony charged with her protection, there was a certain white warhorse who couldn't allow such an insult to go unpunished. In a maneuver I'd only seen before in professional wrestling, Shining Armor dove across the table, knocking it over in the process, grabbed be about the waist, and slammed me into the floor in one smooth motion. The whole spread of food slopped all over the place and the huge, heavy table slammed on the ground with a heavy crash.

"That's enough!" he snarled. "You've gone too far this time, Sombra."

All bets were off. While I struggled to break free from the captain, Luna figured she'd get in on the action too. She put her helmet back on and charged up her horn. "Back to the shadows from whence thou came, beast! Nopony dishonors Our family so!" The only thing preventing her from unleashing armageddon right there on the spot was the fact that Shining Armor had me in a choke hold that kept him within the blast radius. "Captain Armor, seize his crown! We wish to claim it as a trophy."

Scuffling about in a violent pile of spilled food, an unsettling amount of blood, and their own furious anxiety, Shiny, Cadence, and Luna teamed together to put an end to the dictator once and for all.

And yet, like the eye of a hurricane, Celestia remained absolutely serene in the middle of this whirl of chaos. She finished off the last of her tea without a care in the world, softly cleared her throat, and said:

"Stop."

That was it. No magic, no threats, no glares, and she didn't even move from where she sat. She did nothing but tell us, in a nearly conversational tone, to cut it out.

And it was as if time itself stood still.

I did not know why I froze in my tracks, but in that moment I felt an unyielding sense of dread and I could have sworn the walls were closing in around me. Everyone looked to Celestia the way a soon-to-be-liquefied deer stared into the headlights of an oncoming semi. Were it within our powers, we'd have stopped our own heartbeats.

Okay, maybe, just maybe, there was a reason the big one was in charge.

The white mare, notably unstained by all the blood I flung everywhere, walked over to me with a sympathetic look on her face. "You suffer from some rather unique false impressions, King Sombra. It must be difficult to have one's worldview shattered so completely. Are you all right?"

"Graaak!" I choked. It should be mentioned that we froze *exactly* in place when she spoke up.

"Captain, would you please stop strangling the prisoner?" Celestia politely requested. When the princess wanted something done, that mare absolutely drizzled with authority so Shining Armor dropped me without a moment's hesitation.

After a few coughs I could breathe again. Rising shakily to my hooves and stumbling like a drunkard, I began pointing to the guards, the city just outside, my horn, and anything else I thought was fake or impossible. "Whaa... heh... aweh... buh?" I asked. Such eloquence had not been heard since the days of bards and troubadours.

And then I passed out.

Nopony had any idea what to say. It was one of those difficult moments where everyone knew that something needed to be done, but nobody had the foggiest idea of how to proceed.

"In all my years..." Celestia gawked at Sombra's unconscious form.

The elder princess of Equestria was someone who had seen everything, and I did mean *everything*. History always repeated itself and Celestia, to put this in perspective, was a few thousand years old. No matter what situation she faced, she had already seen it, watched the sequels, tolerated the spin-off, and sat through the inferior reboot. By sheer wealth of experience there was nothing she was unprepared for.

Except for this. You could almost call it a compliment.

"His personality. It's unrecognizable. Even without the delusions, something profound must have happened to his mind. Is there nothing of him left?"

Cadence, currently the most experienced in dealing with the dictator, answered her princess. “If there is, then it’s buried pretty deeply. That’s the reason we’ve been keeping such a close eye on him; nopony knows if his true nature will show itself.”

The guards, with some trepidation, took hold of the dark pony and carefully brought him out of the room. Sombra neither stirred nor woke, but he did gargle the whole time. The former tyrant may or may not have swallowed his own tongue. They’d have to check on that.

Cadence watched the procession and groaned. “Ergh, it’s my turn, isn’t it?” As was their agreement, King Sombra must never be without supervision from one of the two royal ponies. Shiny would take a double shift if she asked, but she knew it wouldn’t be fair. As if reading her thoughts, her husband was about to make the offer but Cadence cut him off. “No, dear, it’s okay. I’ll go. Just tell the princesses everything I told you and try to find a way we can fix this.”

And with that said, she gloomily left to follow the guards, quietly griping that the trying tyrant had ruined her whole day.

Once Cadence was gone, Princesses Celestia and Luna looked to Shining Armor with concern etched on their faces.

“She’s been under a lot of stress lately,” Shiny answered their unasked questions. “But all things considered, she’s handled this amazingly well.”

Luna somberly agreed. “We cannot imagine how difficult this must be for her. What are our options?”

“Bleak,” he responded bluntly. “Sombra is mentally unfit for a trial and physically incapable of being imprisoned. As for more direct responses, the two of you won’t banish him unless he makes the first move, and apparently the Crystal Heart agrees with you. We have nothing.”

“You and Princess Cadence handled him admirably thus far,” Luna pointed out. “King Sombra seems to be well under control.”

Shining Armor shook his head in firm denial. “But how long will that last? The second he learns how to break out of a force field, he’s gone. All we have is a hasty, makeshift solution, not something we can really count on. Things would be so much easier if we could just lock him away, but we can’t.”

They were stumped.

“Princess Celestia, you’ve been quiet. Please tell me you have a plan.”

Time and experience forged Celestia’s mind into the single most astute and enlightened perspective the world could possibly offer: a veritable font of judicious wisdom unmatched by any living being. Faced with no other recourse, Shining Armor awaited the peerless council of his immortal sun-queen.

Celestia just shrugged. “I have no idea.”

The captain drooped miserably. Even Luna, possessing the most down-to-earth and familiar opinion of her sister, couldn’t imagine her not having some advice to impart.

“But you’ve been around for over a thousand years,” Shiny half-stated, half-pleaded. “You have to know something, *anything*.”

Regrettably, the princess had nothing to add. “I am sorry, Captain, but even amongst my myriad experiences, this is… unique, to describe it politely. I am just as lost as you.”

Any further conversation was mercifully interrupted by a creak at the door and an awe-stricken gasp. Shining Armor lolled his head wearily. He totally forgot about the desert course.

The staff waiting at the door was treated to the bizarre sight of some distressed nobles standing in a mess of spilled food in a room covered in blood. “Um, your majesties,” a servant stepped back to avoid walking into a small gore-puddle, “is this a bad time?”

Shiny wordlessly righted the table with his magic and signaled form them to come in anyway. After everything that just happened, some stress-eating sounded like a great idea.

Visibly disturbed, the servant-ponies brought in their cart of sparkly desserts and passed them out. They had to try hard not to slip on the greasy mess of food and bodily fluid. None of them envied the ponies who would have to clean the mess off the floor, walls, and furniture. Oh dear, and the ceiling too? The maids were going to throw a conniption about this.

Shiny and the alicorn siblings happily accepted the sweets as a welcome distraction. They all needed a moment clear their heads.

Celestia was never one to turn down cake, her favorite food, especially since that time Pinkie Pie wolfed down an entire prize-winning pastry before she could get a piece. Lately, it seemed that every time a cake was brought out, it would always wind up destroyed or smashed into somepony’s face. Fortunately, this time the chaos chose to detonate before desert could be ruined. She was looking forward to this moment since she sat down, and yet, looking at the delicious dessert on her plate, she couldn’t bring herself to take a bite. Something Sombra said made her lose her appetite.

Celestia waited until the other royals focused squarely on their deserts and looked at her own flank self-consciously. She gave it an experimental poke, then another, before sighing forlornly and pushing her plate away uneaten.

Sombra would pay for this.

Like most of the palace, the infirmary was nearly empty. King Sombra had few if any loyal subjects at the end of his reign, so the entire palace staff consisted of new hires. Recruitment was slow because many crystal ponies still feared the castle, leaving the place with little more than a skeleton crew. It was part of the reason Princess Cadence was so overworked.

The Crystal Empire remained intact throughout the Pre-Classical and Discordian eras of world history, and they were the only pony kingdom who refused to band with the other tribes at the founding of Equestria. Their lack of allies necessitated militarization, and the palace showed lingering signs of that past. The oversized medical wing she now entered, for instance, once housed the recuperating soldiers of long-forgotten battles. Many of Cadence's projects involved repurposing such things for more peaceful ends, such as her order to convert much of the military training ground into a sports facility.

Changing the Empire's culture proved much more difficult. Jousting was immensely popular, but she had to cancel any future exhibition matches after that poor team from Trottawa got decimated by her gladiatorial subjects. But now was not the time to ponder such things. There was a discommodious dictator she had to oversee.

Nodding to a physician timorously spying on the one occupied room, Cadence approached her saluting guards for an update on the situation. "How is he?"

"He would not stop foaming at the mouth, your majesty, so we put him on his side to ensure he did not suffocate. Since then, nothing has happened."

Par for the course at this point. Cadence wondered why she was ever afraid of this guy. "Good. Open the door. I need to speak with him."

"Yes, my princess." The two of them unlocked the door and entered first. Once safety was assured, they took positions at either side of the door and allowed Cadence to enter.

And there he lay, the source of her woes and stress. She saw to her physicians' credit that they did properly bandage his leg. Approaching cautiously, she called out for him. "Sombra."

"*HRAAAALBGLAAAB,*" the twitching, volcanically drooling form of the former tyrant gargled. His eyes were rolled completely back into his skull, but were still wide open, and his limbs splayed out wide and undignified in a way that reminded her of how Shiny would hog the bed in his sleep. Worse, he kept making these gross, throaty gagging noises. All in all, Sombra looked like someone stopped an exorcism halfway through.

She got no other response from the dark pony. The dictator's brain had not yet finished rebooting from recent revelations, so she kept repeating his name in the hopes that he'd wake up. The only other option was to shake him awake, but she wasn't about to touch him. Not without a long pole, at least.

Watching him spasm as if in a nightmare, the princess could only wonder what he was thinking about.

I won't bore you with the details, but my state of mind after I collapsed could be best summarized by screaming at different pitches and volumes. Panicked shrieking, angry roars, sobs of denial, et cetera and so on. I wasn't proud of it.

The whole process lasted about ten minutes and all it accomplished was making me feel sorry for myself. Regaining a sliver of my composure, I started thinking about my situation to keep my mind occupied. I thought about how I got here, what went wrong with the universe, and how I fit into it.

I thought I was dead, and in truth I already made my peace with that fact. I croaked, snuffed it, kicked the bucket, bought the farm, rode the pale horse, and other such euphemisms, especially that last one. Before I woke up with hooves, I was certain that I was a goner, and I knew for a fact I had a near-death experience. It was really fuzzy – something about a staircase was all I remembered – but it definitely happened. And my body... well, let's just say it wasn't in pristine condition. With that in mind, the only rational options to explain my predicament were death or a coma.

And yet I felt pain: real pain from a real hoof on a real horse.

I could no longer take for granted that this was all something my brain cooked up. Sure, dreams can provide some sensations, but nothing as painful and realistic as a knife through the arm. Honestly, I didn't even know where to begin. Is this real life, or is this just fantasy? Was I caught in my own mind's escape from reality? Coma, death, or real life: they all had strong points vying for them.

Look, all the evidence said this was real, but my whole life experience was screaming 'you're in a dream, buddy' because, seriously, c'mon.

Desperate for a solution, a crazy thought entered my mind. If I really was dead – and there actually was life after death – then maybe I wasn't quite worthy enough for the good afterlife. Think about it: what better way was there to prove that I wasn't evil than to put me in the body of someone who already was? Sombra was supposed to be a villain. I had all this power, everyone expected me to be malicious, and I was in a position where I could get away with anything. The only thing holding me back was my own self-control. Could this all be an elaborate test of character? Was Equestria a purgatorial proving ground for my immortal soul?

Man, the Bible was gonna need one whopper of a revision if that was the case. Just imagine the look on people's faces if that went down at the pulpit.

Or, somehow, was this fanciful horse-world an actual place, unconnected to any dreams or afterlife? Some series of events occurred to take my real, concrete soul and stuff it into a real, concrete horsey-king. It was the least likely explanation, but at this point I'd throw anything at the wall to see what stuck.

I couldn't even figure out what happened to me. What was I supposed to do? Filled with existential dismay, I allowed myself to sink silently into depression for some unknown stretch of time.

... Wait a sec... Wait. Wait up. Stop moping, self, I just had an idea.

What was the difference?

If any one of my admittedly baseless ideas were true, then how did it affect me? I already decided to spend my time convincing everyone I wasn't a villain, so none of those theories threw a wrench into my plans.

Option one: coma. There were no consequences to what I did, but being evil would leave a bad taste in my mouth. Option two: purgatory. God was going to get straight-up Old Testament on my rump if I didn't behave. And finally, option three: I was alive and also a mage-unicorn. That meant that these ponies were real individuals to whom I've been kind of a jerk this whole time. Already I felt guilt seeping in.

Nothing changed. Many possibilities presented themselves, but they all had one solution. It was the same answer offered by religion, law, and philosophy the whole world over: Just live, and don't be a dick.

And so it was decided. No more angst. Just work up a smile and live.

It didn't matter if I really believed, because no matter how I tried to slice it, it was more pragmatic to play along. If Equestria did exist, then I had a long, full life ahead of me that I was currently ruining by alienating myself from this world's locals. And if it was fake, then the only damage I'd do to myself by accepting this place would be waking up one day and saying 'Wow. How did I fall for that?' Acting as if Equestria was real reaped either infinite rewards or nothing at all.

Basically, I enforced upon myself a ponyified Pascal's Wager. From my perspective, there was no downside to wholeheartedly diving right into this madhouse.

Furthermore, these Equestrians didn't seem fake to me. Compared to the actors in my dreams, who were only there to fill a role, these ponies had their own personalities and acted in ways independent from my desires. What, then, was the functional difference between them and real people? 'Cogito ergo sum,' and all that. I was here and they were here, so that made Equestria no more solipsistic than Earth.

Alright, Equestria, time for round two. Screw it. I'll be Sombra. I'll take command of his dark magic and everything that goes with it. But if the universe wanted me to Quantum Leap into this role,

then I was going to play it by my rules. Who said that darkness had to be evil? Who was destiny to tell me what I could or couldn't do? Fate or God or whoever was going to have to sit back while I seized life by the red, pointy horn!

Our short lives are not to be taken for granted. We are all phantoms piloting a flesh-and-bone construct made eons ago by nuclear fusion. That's nothing mundane; that's a superhero's origin story. If I was to live again, then I owed it to whatever revived me to live to the absolute fullest. The real Sombra built up a heartless, sadistic image from a lifetime of cruelty and I was gonna *shatter* it. From now on, I am the new King Sombra! I am the king of the Crystal Empire! I-

"Ah'm thuh horsey-king," I mumbled incoherently. Dang it, why'd I have to wake up on that one?

"*Y...re ...wake*," something said.

"Weugh?" My bleary eyes slowly regained their focus and I saw a familiar pink form solidify in front of me. With my habitual bad decisions and terrible luck, this kind of thing was inevitable; I always knew I'd wake up next to a horse-faced woman on all fours. Too bad it had to be literal. "Hey, Cadence."

The princess prodded me with dull end of one of her guards' spears to get me to stir. By the soreness in my side she'd been at it for a while.

"Good. You're finally awake." She discarded her prod. "We need to talk."

"Heck yeah we do. I've had some time to think, and I've come to some very important realizations."

She regarded me suspiciously while I rolled off the bed and onto my hooves, and that suspicion turned to alarm when my horn took on its toxic, green and purple bubbling.

A large slab of dark crystal rose in front of me on command, and I took a good, long look at the face in the reflection. No matter which angle I turned, the face looked nothing like me, not even how I imagined a pony-version of myself to look.

"I've decided that I am King Sombra."

The blood drained from Cadence's face and her horn ignited.

"But not like that!" I amended before she had a chance to overreact. "Like, good. Good-Sombra. You get what I mean?"

She most definitely did not get what I meant if her breathing rate was any indication.

"Just hear me out. See, the thing is, whenever someone sees me, they will see him. As far as everyone else is concerned, I am King Sombra whether I like it or not."

"You *are* King Sombra," she contended.

"Exactly. But you're seeing *what* I am, not *who* I am. No one can. Even though I'm not him, others will still treat me as if I was. I can't just say 'Nope. Different guy.' and expect them to follow along. His actions will follow me wherever I go," I explained. "So I asked myself, how do I fight it?"

Cautiously, the princess waved her guards off and dimmed her horn. She didn't actually get what I was talking about, but understood enough to know that I wasn't about to torch the place. She was certain she was being lied to, but had nothing to support those suspicions.

"And the answer is 'Don't. Just give up, it ain't happening.' There's no way I'm going to get rid of his reputation, so instead of denying it all together, I can change it from within."

Cadence wore a decidedly non-princess-like, 'are you freaking kidding me' sort of expression. "Is this a joke?"

"Not at all," I answered. "With enough time and effort, the things I do will steadily overwrite whatever bad stuff the old Sombra did." I failed to notice Cadence's worsening scowl while I prattled about my plans nonchalantly.

"Alright, step one to life in Equestria is to ditch the dream logic. A lot of the stuff you guys told me was dismissed as unimportant at the time. Looking back, I'll bet there were all kinds of things I misread thanks to my flippant disregard of my surroundi-"

I shut my stupid mouth.

In my mind I heard a sound not unlike the squealing tires of a car accident. My eyes opened with long overdue revelation. "Oh my god." If I were closer to the wall, I'd have bashed my head against it so hard my horn would snap. "This is the Crystal Empire, isn't it?"

Cadence froze in place. "It n-no it's-" she stuttered. It will forever remain a mystery how something with fur could turn that pale.

"That was rhetorical, princess. I got enough of a hint form the crystal ponies living in the crystal buildings of their crystal city, eating crystal food, and basking in the light of the Crystal Heart," I huffed. "The rest was guesswork."

Unbeknownst to me, Cadence's official title was Crystal Princess, but after everything I said there was simply no more room for that final nail in the coffin. Oh, and the city was located near a place called the Crystal Mountains, so that coffin was basically a pincushion of discrediting evidence. My assumptions: they shan't be missed.

"So the ponies are freaked out not because I'm some foreign invader, but because I was actually here oppressing them for God knows how long?"

Afraid of how I'd react, but knowing that she could hide the truth no longer, she wordlessly gave a quick nod.

"Well, that's just *perfect*," I barked. "Wow... Okay... Man, I've really got my work cut out for me. I take it back; this one ain't gonna solve itself."

You know that problem I have where I say the wrong thing at the wrong time? It happened again.

"Solve itself!" Cadence exclaimed. "That's what you assumed?!" I'd seen Cadence afraid, confused, angry, and in shock, but this was the first time I saw her burn with righteous indignation. The jarring transition from cautious timidity to concentrated ire forced me back a few steps. A DJ couldn't turn tables faster than this.

"You thought your crimes would just fade away? That if you waited long enough it would all blow over? You- you arrogant... Argh!" she screamed. The princess was so enraged that she couldn't even think of an insult. "Do you have any idea what you have done?!"

"N-no?" I backed up so far my rump bumped into a corner, but Cadence was always right in my face. "He – I mean, I- uh, Sombra let power go to his head, right? I can fix that."

"Fix it? Fix it!" she roared. "Your reign left the whole Empire with scars, both mental and physical, that will never disappear! You personally devastated a prosperous kingdom into ruin! The crystal ponies still have nightmares about you!"

"Holy crap, really?"

"Not to mention the recent assaults on the city," she continued her rant, probably unable to hear me. "Both of them!"

"I get it," I said, unsubtly telling her to stop. "Cadence, please take it easy with the world-shattering revelations. I *just* woke up from a whole thing about that."

Even though she wasn't supposed to reveal anything about Sombra's history to me, she was just so angry at what she perceived to be my indifference to the suffering I caused that she couldn't stop herself. The only thing that her fiery eyes could see was the scared faces of her subjects, and to hear the impertinent, almost careless audacity in which I dismissed their anguish sent Cadence into an outrage. The princess spilled her guts, letting out all the dirty secrets she knew about Sombra and shoving them in my face, as if daring me to brush them off.

"Do you still think you can fix everything? How about the fact that you froze them in time for a whole millennium? Do you have a plan to make up for that? And then there was the forced memory wipes!"

"Thank you, Cadence, that's quite enough."

But it wasn't enough. Cadence hoarded a lot of pent up frustration over the past several hours and she wasn't about to let me off so quickly. "That's *Princess Cadenza* to you, and we've barely scratched the surface! Did you know about the slavery?"

My jaw went slack. "What. Woah, wait, just how evil was this guy?"

"The worst! The whole Empire was forced beneath your yoke. And we still don't know the full extent of your cruelty!" my pink interrogator seethed. "Do you have anything to say for yourself!?"

"I... he- I'm not..."

While my head spun from learning of my previous tenant's crimes, Cadence mercifully stopped. For a few seconds, anyway. "And you forced poor little Spike to watch an illusion of himself being abandoned by the only family he'd ever known. Spike is a baby, by the way."

Okay, that, right there, was all I could take.

I slowly turned to gawp at Cadence, my face twisted by anathematic revulsion. "... eh?" I squeaked. By the conviction in her eyes, I knew she wasn't lying. This time, I actually did walk over to the wall and bash my head against it. "OH, COME ON! That's, like... WHAT?! How-? What conceivable purpose... a baby?!"

That was far, far beyond anything I could have imagined. I realized that I was supposed to be a tyrant, and that throughout history people did terrible things to stay in power, but that was just being rotten for its own sake. This was puppy-drowning levels of needless cruelty. I wasn't just a villain; I was Equestria's answer to the Pharaoh of the Exodus. I was the worst pony ever, and as close to a personification of evil as anyone could become. Cadence was right; there was no fixing this. I felt like I needed to throw up.

But she just kept going. "And those are just the things we know for certain. We'll never know it all because the crystal ponies, who lived through it all, actually *prefer* to keep their minds erased than to remember what you did to them!"

Not for the first time, I found myself asking why it had to be me. Why did I have to be him? Out of anyone else in the world I could have become, the face in the mirror had to be the single worst of the lot.

"Well?!" my pink interrogator seethed. "Say something!"

"I- I can't..." Deep breaths. Deep breaths. "Sorry, I'm just a bit hyperventilatey right now."

Hail to the King

I couldn't do it. No. It was too much. I knew he was hated, but I never thought it would sink to such depths. Amazed by how much I underestimated how vile my new identity was, I sank to the floor with a faraway look in my eyes.

Cadence got the hint that I was about to pass out a second time, so she stopped her verbal assault to let me quiver in silence. Panting heavily, the pathetic and dumbfounded reaction I gave her was enough to extinguish her ire for a fraction of a second. "... you actually didn't know..." she whispered barely loud enough for me to hear. Her moment of weakness was instantly repaired, however, and the unforgiving scowl returned to her face just as quickly.

That was where I realized the hidden truth of the matter. If this was how I felt about Sombra, then just imagine how she and the rest of the city must feel. Cadence wasn't naturally angry, or spiteful, or distrusting like I'd assumed. She was hurt. Sombra hurt her badly, and her whole nation shared in that pain.

Snapping back to reality, the tiniest spark of hope ignited in my chest. "This... this changes nothing." I said under my breath. Blinking my eyes back into focus, I belatedly noticed how watery they'd become. "If anything, it just makes it more important."

"What are you saying?" the princess asked, but I was too busy forming a plan in my mind to answer.

"... That's it," I smirked. "That's it. I get it now! That's it!"

While Cadence checked on their unquestionably disturbed prisoner, Shining armor filled the co-rulers in on the whole Sombra issue.

"You're kidding," Luna deadpanned. She even dropped out of her flowery, antiquated manner of speaking, having found the bluntness of modern speech to be a better way to express her doubt and vexation.

"Sorry, princess, but no," the prince responded. "The whole thing's been verified by a lie detector. The question now is what we do with him. I don't care if he thinks he's a human, a goldfish, or a fire-breathing dragon, what matters is whether or not he's a threat to the city."

"Is he, though?" Luna wondered. "Sombra may be considerably more powerful than an ordinary unicorn, but his danger stemmed from his willingness to commit atrocities, not from his strength. Our every clash has ended in his unequivocal defeat, and without a single casualty. To use a modern colloquialism: we'd wipe the floor with him."

"No way. There is always the chance of collateral damage, so I'm trying to put off a fight until we have a guaranteed, instant win. You didn't see what his last invasion did to Cadence. She was ready to collapse by the time Sombra was defeated. I won't put her through that again."

In stark contrast to all the doomsaying going around, Celestia had spent the whole conversation in contemplative silence. While the others prepared for the worst case scenario, a marvelous thought occurred to her. "Correct me if I am wrong, but all of our fears hinge on Sombra remembering who he was, and attempting to regain what he lost."

"Well, yes," the captain answered. "Isn't that obvious?"

"It is," the princess continued, "but I believe we are asking the wrong question. We are asking when he becomes his former self, as if it is a forgone conclusion. But what if it isn't inevitable? And even if we can't stop him from regaining his memories, what if the consequences can be prevented?"

They were going to need some clarification on that one.

"Sombra asked us to tell him his own history. Don't you see what that means? Other than his name, I doubt he knows anything about himself. His mind is confused, broken, and – I suspect – malleable. This provides us with a unique opportunity to rid ourselves of an enemy and, with any luck, turn his powers to more constructive purposes."

Thanks to the presence of magic in Equestria, emotions were perceptible, external forces no less real than the laws of physics. But even with this in mind, the ponies couldn't help but think that Celestia was being a bit too idealistic for her own good. Not everypony was as powerful as her to afford the luxury of mercy.

Shiny found that idea disturbing in more ways than one. First, Celestia's plan involved a distinct lack of banishment and smiting. Secondly: "Are you telling me that you want us to brainwash him?"

"No!" she exclaimed, mortified by the thought. "Goodness, no. I believe rehabilitate would be a better word. In our conversation with him, I detected no malice or dishonesty, so for the time being this is his real personality. He genuinely does not want to hurt anypony. All I want you to do is to reinforce that notion."

Semantics, Shiny thought. He could admit that the current king was a lot more preferable to the old one, but he sincerely doubted that Sombra, the most odious pony in the world, could ever be reformed like Celestia hoped. Shining Armor agreed with his wife that the reprieve offered by Sombra's madness was temporary, and that the second he came to his senses, the dark unicorn would be right back to his execrable villainy.

But, ultimately, no other ways to deal with the dictator existed. Celestia refused to seal him in the ice and the Heart was on the fritz for some reason. The captain reluctantly chose to follow his princess's suggestion, if only because there was nothing else he could do.

"I doubt it, and even if he can be tamed, how do we make him sane while keeping him crazy?" asked the prince. The alicorns looked at him strangely, and the stallion shrank under their gaze. "Sorry. It's... it's been a long day," he muttered. "You know what I mean. How do we keep the benign personality in place, while convincing him that he is, in fact, a pony?"

"Why bother at all?" Luna asked. "If he is evil, then he should be sent to the dungeon. If insane, then he should be committed. In either case the solution is to simply keep him contained. Why waste further effort?"

"No, Luna, you misunderstood. When I say we can't just lock him away, I meant that we actually *can't* just lock him away. We tried that already and it didn't work."

Luna wasn't one to bother with the velvet glove approach. She was doing her best to learn how to be more diplomatic, but until then she wasn't ready to venture out of her comfort zone. This was the same pony who still couldn't break out of the royal we and once tried to turn Nightmare Night into a feast in her honor. "We could call upon the Elements of Harmony," she suggested. It was pretty much the only other thing she could think of.

Shining Armor frowned. Relying on Twilight and her friends rapidly became the doctrinaire solution to Equestria's woes, and he felt it was unfair to constantly put them in danger. "I meant what can *we* do. Lately it seems like every threat we come across ends with us foisting our problems on my little sister."

"She and her friends have proven themselves quite capable," Luna maintained. "We stand before thee as living proof."

"Yes, but my city and my wife are already in danger; I'm not about to put my family in harm's way too."

Celestia interjected between the two of them. "While I too am confident in Twilight's abilities, I have to agree with Shining Armor. The magic of the Elements of Harmony is mysterious, even to me. But both the Elements and the Crystal Heart function under one principle: they restore order. Where there is disharmony, they bring peace. What was corrupted is restored. If the Heart failed, then so would the Elements. The only reason Sombra could have survived the light of the Crystal Heart was if there was nothing to correct."

The white stallion could hardly believe her words. "Nothing!?" he spat. This was the closest to anger that Shining Armor could ever feel towards Celestia. "He's a sociopathic, power-hungry, objectively evil psychopath who enslaved an entire ethnicity! You and your sister should get together and cram him into the ice like you did before. Can't you see what he represents? Strike him down while he's weak!"

Luna, despite sharing the captain's viewpoint to the letter, shook her head sadly. "That would be inadvisable. When we first sealed King Sombra away, his banishment was supposed to be permanent. He could only escape by subverting the spell itself. If it was broken once, then it can be broken again should his memories return in the course of his exile."

Celestia nodded, seeing where her sister was going. "And having learned how to escape at will, he could reappear at his leisure. That is, when the empire is most vulnerable."

That didn't sit well with Shining Armor. Nopony wanted to admit the implications, but everything led to one undesirable conclusion. "So we're stuck with him, is what you're saying."

"For now that seems to be the case," Celestia acknowledged sadly. "I am sorry, Shining Armor. But it is currently our best option."

The prince-captain's voice was heavy with disappointment. "Alright," he murmured, "but don't think this is over. Let's not dwell on things we can't fix. We'll find a solution once we know more about him. So what do we know? How could Sombra go from a malicious destroyer to," he waved a hoof in the general direction of the infirmary, "that?"

The two alicorns followed his hoof with their eyes to where said unicorn was being kept. "That is a very good question," Celestia acknowledged. Neither of them really put much thought to it, being more concerned with the ponies' safety than the hows and whys of Sombra's revival.

They'd only been here since dinner, after all.

Luna chose to go with the easiest answer. "If nopony ever heard him speak at length until today, then perhaps he was always so disturbed," she suggested.

Shining Armor strongly disagreed. "No, I don't think it can be that simple," he argued. "The old Sombra we fought was focused and deadly. He kept several contingency plans and was only stopped thanks to Twily and her assistant's wildcard interference. I'm pretty sure this new one's been eating paint chips or something. He's nuts." Discarding the problems with his lost memories, there was still a metaphysical 'Sombra-ness' that the current pony lacked. The cruelty and aggression that defined the dictator was supplanted by an oblivious, almost naïve enthusiasm that the captain found rather annoying.

Celestia also recognized the change, but was still just as uninformed as her sister.

"The Crystal Heart exists to abolish evil. It could be that when Sombra was purged by its light, it destroyed so much of him that there wasn't much left," she pulled straight from her flank.

Shiny found her answer slightly more plausible, but still unsatisfying. "Hmm. I could believe that for the memory loss, but where did these human fantasies come from?"

Hail to the King

Celestia was uncertain and it showed. Few situations presented themselves where she hadn't treaded before, but this Sombra conundrum was a jumbled mess of inscrutable x-factors.

"The mind is a mysterious thing, especially one that has been damaged so severely. Perhaps it simply needed to fill in the blanks. Humans are obviously a stand-in for the Crystal Empire. No magic, high technology, and tall buildings all fit into place in a way that cannot be coincidence: There were no unicorns besides Sombra himself in the empire, the palace is considered a wonder even by today's standards, and at the time of his banishment this was the most advanced of the pony kingdoms."

"That still doesn't explain why his brain would jump species like that," Shining Armor said.

Celestia straddled a line between brainstorming and justification. "I cannot be sure," she admitted. "The only times I've seen memories twisted in such a manner was as a coping mechanism. But if that is true, then something must have happened to make him want – perhaps need – to disassociate himself from ponies altogether."

"Princess, that's quite a stretch." Shiny held on to his doubts, but even he was starting to come around. The pieces just came together too well.

"We concur," added Luna. "Sombra was the very standard upon which evil is judged."

Not even Celestia was fully convinced by her own argument, but something needed to be said to make sense of this situation. As she already stated several times, she did not have the answers. But her sister and nephew-in-law looked up to her for guidance, so she had to say something to put their minds at ease, even if she wasn't so sure of it herself.

"If Sombra was completely unrepentant, and wholly evil to his very core," she began, "then the Crystal Heart would have ended his life. As I said: corruption is eradicated. Were he nothing but corrupt, he would die. As for his delusions I have only my own assumptions. Supposing, as I suspect, that his evil was purified by the Crystal Heart, I can only imagine that his madness was born of guilt, something like 'I couldn't have done those terrible things, because King Sombra was a unicorn, and I am a human.' The weight of his own crimes may have been too much strain for his mind to bear."

That hit way too close to home for Luna. As Nightmare Moon, she was stopped before she had a chance to hurt anypony, but she lost a lot of sleep wondering what would have happened if Twilight didn't get to her in time. What if Nightmare Moon hurt or killed a pony? Luna was unsure if she could bare that kind of guilt.

Celestia was wrong, of course. Utterly, unambiguously, indefensibly wrong, but she made so much terrible sense. Luna and Shining Armor ate up every word and accepted her groundless conjectures as iron-clad truth.

"There are still so many more issues," she continued, "other than his lost memories, he still thinks the world is not real and does not believe himself to be a pony. But I believe there is still hope. We all saw

how he reacted to his self-inflicted wound. At the very least, Sombra can't possibly claim to be in a dream anymore. Hopefully now he won't be suffering from two delusions at once."

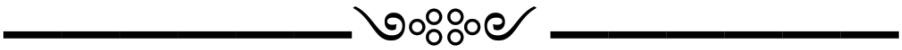
Just then, the muffled, but unmistakable voice of Sombra boomed from behind closed doors. "I have discovered my mission in life!"

"Three delusions," Celestia amended without missing a beat. "It seems Princess Cadence has been busy."

Shiny quickly jumped to his feet, still certain that any news regarding Sombra was bad news. "And she might be in danger! We need to get there right now!"

Celestia agreed immediately. "I will get us there right away. Gather around me," she said as she prepared a teleportation spell. The white princess didn't expect in any imminent disaster, especially with Cadence in charge, but on the off chance things went south, she needed to be there. "Be on guard, you two. None of us know what to expect."

Shining Armor and Luna took positions at her side and Celestia's horn turned gold. The white mare cast her spell around all three of them-



- And they reappeared next to Cadence and me. After all that had happened, things like teleporting didn't even faze me. I swore to live as if this were real, so no matter how impossible something seemed, I made sure to let it pass without comment. So yeah, teleporting. Why not?

"Hey, everyone, you're arrived just in time," I greeted casually.

"Thou mean we *caught* thee just in time," Luna accused. "What art thou planning?"

Of all the responses she expected from me, she did not anticipate a bright, face-splitting smile. "Fixing the Crystal Empire, that's what!"

Standing beside her, Shining Armor gasped sharply. "Cadence, get the Heart right now. We'll hold him here."

"Oh, stop it already and let me explain." I'd become a bit sick of their nonstop paranoia. "Me being here in Equestria couldn't have been an accident; I can't accept that I got put here by some random mistake, especially as someone so infamous. Nope, I'm here for a reason. I'm sure of it."

The ponies chalked that statement up to delusions of grandeur, bringing the total up to four.

Hail to the King

"At first, I thought this was all about me, that there was something I had to learn or do." I paced back and forth, motioning with my hooves to explain my point in a way that probably only made sense to me. I'd always been one to talk with my hands, and the lack of hands did nothing to change that habit.

"But then Cadence told me what this Sombra character did to your city, and I realized something. I'm not here for me," I smiled as warmly as my face would allow and pointed out a window to the Crystal Empire, "I'm here for them. We've got a whole city of people scared out of their minds, and it's my job to fix it."

Shining Armor leaned over to Cadence. "What kind of anesthetics did the doctors give him?" he whispered.

"None," an utterly stunned Cadence answered. "He's stone-cold sober right now."

Not even listening to those two, I gleefully continued. "When someone falls in front of you, you pick them up. When somebody is struggling to hold something, you help them carry it. Anytime someone is right in front of you and needs help, you have an obligation give it. This is no different."

I punctuated my little spiel with a determined smirk and a firm stomp to the ground. If there was one – and so far, only one – advantage hooves had over hands, it was the satisfying, definitive clap they made on the floor. Finishing my statements with a good stomp made them seem so much more conclusive.

"Luna, earlier you asked me what direction I have planned for myself. Well, I found it. The Crystal Empire needs my help. I'm telling the people. Everyone – I mean, every*pony*," I winked, "needs to hear the good news. I'm gonna walk right out to the city and tell 'em all that everything's going to be alright!"

Be it from alarm, interest, or excitement, there wasn't a single pair of ears in the room that didn't shoot straight up. Shining Armor scrambled to block the doorway as Cadence rushed up to me, her tail flicking in anxiety. "Wait! No, Sombra, you do not get to go outside. In fact, stand at the exact center of the palace and don't move!"

"Nuh-uh," I shook my head. "I'm totally gonna do this."

"No, Sombra. Don't you dare!" shouted Shining Armor from his post at the entrance.

"This is happening!" I insisted.

"No!" the couple snapped in stereo.

"YES!" I shouted with a mighty leap. Activating my shadow-powers at the apex of my jump, I seemingly dove into the ground. There, a smoky patch of darkness slid across the floor right between Shining Armor's legs, zipping away from the royal ponies and disappearing around a corner.

"After him!" Shining Armor shouted. There was no telling what would happen if Sombra was allowed to speak to the whole Empire. He needed to be stopped. All of the royal ponies recognized this and darted for the exit.

Tragically enough, all four of them tried to leave the room at the exact same time. The subsequent clogging of the doorway gave me enough time to flee out of sight.

"No! We can't let him get away!" cried Cadence. Desperately squirming and twisting around, she managed to pop herself out of the mass of noble ponies, but, unfortunately she was too late. Galloping out of the infirmary and rounding the corner revealed no clues to my whereabouts.

"Where?" Cadence's eyes dashed back and forth, looking for any sign of a shadow out of place. "The balcony!" she exclaimed to the still-squirming pile of Equestria's executive branch. "If he wants to address the Empire, that's the only place he would want to go. We can't lose him! Let's go!" she shouted.

Her husband managed to squeeze himself out from between two alicorns, and so became second one out of the medical wing.

He barged his way forward with the same bull-like ferocity he displayed in today's first chase against Sombra. Sprinting with all his might, he tore through the palace at a breakneck pace. His wife spread her wings and flew through the narrow corridors just ahead of him.

Their hearts sank every time they turned a corner and didn't see a shadow racing along the floor, knowing that Sombra could already be at the end where he'd be showing himself unsupervised and unrestrained to a populace who thought he was under control. Following a twisting path of labyrinthine halls and spiraling stairways, the two of them reached their destination with unsurpassable speed.

Celestia and Luna were already there. The ageless alicorns simply teleported to the balcony and would have been happy to bring Shiny and Cadence along if they hadn't dashed away like they did.

Sombra, however, was nowhere in sight. Eyes scanned every corner, ears swiveled to hear the faintest sound, and horns ignited just in case. Glancing back and forth with guarded caution, Shiny readied himself for a second bout with the shadow-stallion. Quite literally jumping at shadows, and even tapping a few just to be sure, Shining Armor couldn't find hide or hair of his elusive prey.

"Darn it all, where did he go?"

Down in the dungeons and past several half-repaired walls, I materialized out of my slithering shadow. Originally, I planned to head to the balcony, but I had no idea how to get there. Fortunately, I knew where to find another suitable rupture in the palace carved by none other than yours truly.

Hail to the King

My freedom-hole began as an escape attempt, but it would now serve a nobler purpose. Strutting confidently to the wide open break, I breathed deeply and let loose a resounding bellow.

"Attention, pedestrians!" I thundered.

That shout echoed across the whole landscape, and all activity in the town ground to a skittish halt.

"Behold! I am King Sombra of the Crystal Empire! That's right! The same one y'all tried to chase out of town this morning – not that I'm bitter or anything – and I am absolutely stoked to announce that I am **not** evil!"

The crowd was about to perform their obligatory screams and pointing, but I continued before they had the opportunity.

"Not anymore at least; it's complicated. The point is, things are 'bout to change around here. You may be asking yourself, 'hey, aren't you that evil guy who did that evil stuff?' Well, you'd be half-right. The old pony is gone, and I'm in charge now! Listen up, because I have a confession to make." I paused dramatically to make sure everyone was listening.

"Everypony, I *am a space alien*!"

No one gasped like I expected them to. Instead, they either shuffled backwards or ensured that there was some form of cover between me and them. Oh well, on with the show.

"I'm not kidding! Sombra is dead; long live the new Sombra! I'm seizing control of this body and walking it around like a meat-puppet. And that's good news for you! As an extraterrestrial ghost from another dimension possessing the body of an evil, sorcerous, unicorn-emperor, I promise you that the tyranny you once knew is at an end!"

What a unique sentence. Public speaking wasn't a forte of mine, as should be surpassingly obvious by now.

"But it ain't enough just to say it's over. This place needs to heal, and by virtue of controlling the one who caused all, I'm in the best position to help. The real Sombra terrified this city. Like that guy," I pointed to a random onlooker. "Yes, you, the shivering one who's trying to hide. Don't think I can't see you! That's exactly the kind of reaction I'm gonna get rid of. I'll exterminate it!"

The pony dashed into a nearby building at my inexcusably terrible choice of words.

"I am not just me. I'm not just Sombra. I am me-in-the-body-of-Sombra. From now on his name is mine and his power is mine, and so his crimes are mine to resolve! I'll take all the baggage that malicious jerk left me and I'm setting it right!" I laughed enthusiastically, but there was a distinct chance that it sounded like malevolent cackling. "You heard that, everyone! The Crystal Empire will never be the same! It begins. IT BEGINS!"

Keep in mind that this was all being said in the deep, dark voice of an evil villain: not exactly the sound of optimism. I'd become used to this voice via nonstop jabbering, so it no longer sounded like a rockslide, but even then, if I hummed next to someone playing a bass guitar you wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

Nevertheless, I reared up on hind legs and spread my front hooves wide, smiling ecstatically for the whole world to see. "I am King Sombra, and you're gonna love me!"

When the first words exploded across the empire, Cadence and Shining Armor felt like they'd been kicked in the stomach. Cadence blanched again and Shining Armor, unable to turn paler than he already was, developed dark lines under his eyes. Here was their worst enemy, unrestricted, with free access to their citizens. And he openly blabbed about his delusions! If they couldn't find a way to put a positive spin on this, those crystal ponies were going to have a meltdown.

"The dungeons!" Shiny somehow managed to gasp and shout at the same time. Without a single instant separating realization with action, the captain shot back into the palace at a full gallop.

Cadence was about to take flight to get to the breach faster, but was held back by the white foreleg of Celestia. The elder mare shook her head with a faint smile and beckoned the younger princess to take a seat. On a day to day basis, Celestia had two moods: maternally supportive or mischievously bored. Cadence was unsure which of the two her princess was displaying now, and they might not have been mutually exclusive.

"Auntie, please," she begged. Why couldn't Celestia see the exigent need to silence that blathering maniac?

Cadence looked to her pleadingly. Celestia looked back expectantly. Frustrated but unwilling to disappoint her only superior, Cadence closed her wings to her sides and took a seat next to Luna. She made a mental note that she and her husband *really* needed to learn the teleportation spell.

And so, the three of them sat there, letting their subjects listen to the poorly improvised speech of King Sombra as it echoed throughout the city.

"It is now occurring to me that I should've prepared a statement beforehand. To be honest, I'm playing this by ear." By that point I maundered through this thing without any real plan. My outline consisted of 'I'm not evil, I'm secretly an alien, and I'm going to make everything better.' Once that was done, I had no idea where I was going with my speech.

Hail to the King

When I squinted hard enough, I saw that the crystal ponies were completely lost as to how they were supposed to deal with this whole situation. One of them, however, held something red – either a tomato or a brick – signifying that my welcome rapidly exhausted itself.

"I can't reiterate this enough; I'm not going to hurt you. No more evil. Oppression is done. And furthermore, I-"

"There you are!"

Well, shoot. The captain of the guard clambered through the destroyed wall behind me. He must have sprinted pretty dang hard to get to me. The stallion was completely out of breath.

"Sombra! Step away from the freedom-hole," Shiny demanded. The second the words left his mouth he flinched. "I mean the breach in the castle wall," he corrected. The madness was spreading.

Shining Armor's interruption momentarily put my speech on pause. "*I'm kind of in the middle of something,*" I whispered harshly.

Rudely enough, a pink outline formed around me as Shining Armor, in no mood to talk, cast a levitation spell on me. Thinking quickly – or, rather, instinctively following the first idea that popped into my head – I grabbed the edge of the wall a split second before Shiny pulled me back into the castle. A game of tug-o-war began between the two of us: his magic against my grip.

"Grrgh!" he struggled. "Get back in the palace before you ruin everything!"

At that point any form of eloquence, scarce and pathetic as it may have been, was abandoned in favor of spilling out as many words as possible. "So yeah, I'm totally a good guy now!" I rambled loudly. "I'd go into detail if *someone* wasn't dragging me off stage."

"Let go!" the aforementioned someone ordered.

As he tried to reel me in like the scrappiest marlin ever, I clung to the edges of the wall and kept yelling to the audience. Having only seconds before my forelegs gave out, I grunted and strained to spew as much as I could from my freedom-hole onto the attentive faces below.

"Mark my words! This day signifies the advent of a new era for this city. We're gonna be in the history books, people! From now on, I, ruler of the Crystal Empire and history's greatest monster, shall be the **best king who ever lived**!" I proclaimed as a tattoo appeared on my butt.

And right then I lost my grip. In much the same way a slingshot works, Shiny's telekinetic tugging released so much force all at once that I smacked right into him with the overwhelming power of a football lineman. One of the fat ones.

"*PWUEH!*" All of the air in his lungs exploded outwards from my inadvertent, horizontal cannonball. We wound up tumbling cartoonishly end-over-end until we crashed into one of the far

walls. Fate despised us both in equal measure, but was seemingly done with me for the day, so I ended up on top of the poor guy.

A few coughs and a groan of pain later, the imaginary birds circling our heads fled the scene.

"Owww," both of us whined simultaneously. I was honestly at a loss over who was to blame for this one.

"Sombra," Shining Armor wheezed, barely able to draw breath. "I hate you so much."

"Yeah, I know." I wasn't in much better shape. "But I think, one of these days, we're gonna look back on this and laugh. I bet even now, those citizens are thinking to themselves 'Wow. Who'd've thought that even he could change so much.' It won't be long now 'till I win over their hearts and minds."

It sounded like I was deceiving myself, and I'd be the first to admit it. But ultimately, one must realize that how we reacted to our station was our choice to make. Things like anger and self-pity never solved anyone's problems. Life was what you made it, and by God I was gonna make it something good. So even if Equestria stripped me of my humanity, threw me into an alien world, and foisted me with the worst reputation imaginable, I'd still find a way to make it work. Bring it on, universe. What else ya got?

And as for Shiny... eh, he'd come around eventually.

"Get off of me," my fellow unicorn shoved me off with one mighty push. "What were you thinking? You're lucky you didn't cause a panic out there."

"It can't be any worse than how they felt before." I offered him a hoof to help him up which, unexpectedly, he accepted. "Nothing but good can come of this."

Then, as if answering me, a single tomato arced through the freedom-hole and splattered on the floor. If Shiny hadn't pulled me away when he did, it would have hit me in the face. Strange as it may sound, I actually took that to be a positive sign. "See? We've already progressed from fearful despair to riotous anger. And it's only been one day! Just you wait until I really get started."

The implication meant that this was just the beginning of a whole lot more of this crap, and it was in no way lost on Shining Armor. "Started?" The captain froze in place and his ears perked aggressively. His eyes narrowed even while twitching and his lip rose into an angry snarl.

"Uh, dude, you okay?"

Back on the palace balcony, the alicorns, respectively confused, amused, and face-palming, had to take a moment to mentally digest what may have been the worst speech they ever heard.

Celestia was all smiles. “Well, that certainly wasn’t what I was expecting.” As far as she was concerned, that sold it. Sombra was no longer Sombra. While, yes, there was the danger that this only represented a temporary loss of his mental facilities, at least – at the very least – they should at see how this all developed before passing judgment.

And if he did turn evil, then the Crystal Heart would work again. Boom, problem solved.

The queen in all but name looked to her fellow princesses for their opinions. “What did you two think of it?”

They didn’t share her enthusiasm. Luna still had trouble making sense of this whole scenario. She had one ear perked upwards and the other flat against her head in sheer bafflement. “I- I don’t…” she mumbled. Things would’ve been so much easier if they just showed up, blasted the red-horned freak, and left in time for dinner.

Cadence, on the other hand, just didn’t care anymore. After everything else that happened today, one more drop in the overflowing bucket didn’t mean much to her. “I’ll have to make a speech of my own, or at least call a town meeting,” she said. Capitulating to the lunacy, she decided to focus her energies on damage control rather than her futile attempts at containment.

“Will you really need to? He seemed quite clear about his intentions,” said the taller princess.

Let’s be honest here: Celestia had no business being this trusting. Based solely on the information provided, anyone with a lick of sense would have taken Sombra out back and executed him like an aging sheepdog. Princess Celestia, however, was not without her biases. She believed without exception that there was good in everyone, and even the vilest beings in the world possessed a seed of nobility buried deep within their hearts. The misunderstandings at dinner nearly shattered that belief, but subsequent events brought it roaring back. Yes, she decided, he can be redeemed. If only to validate her personal worldview, and prove that harmony pervaded all that lived, King Sombra will be brought to the side of the light.

The thought of it brought a smile to her face.

Her satisfied musings were cut short, however, by a cacophonous racquet from inside the palace. “Hey! Stop. I take it back. You can use the bubble again!” they heard Sombra’s voice loudly plead. Distressingly enough, it was accompanied by the noise of several bumps, a number of loud bashes, and at least one shattered vase.

Out stomped Shining Armor, horn aglow and brow furrowed, followed shortly by me being forcefully slid across the floor.

A faint outline signified Shiny’s low-level telekinesis spell – the magical equivalent of pulling someone along by the hand – which kept me moving forward whether I liked it or not. Being clumsy and unfamiliar with quadrupedalism, however, I tripped several times along the way and found myself

being dragged across the floor for nearly the whole route. I must have knocked down every piece of furniture in the building. Furthermore, a lot of dust had not been swept from the floor of the understaffed palace, so pretty much all of it was in my coat now.

"Got him." Shiny looked like he just ran a marathon.

Dropping me in the center of the balcony, he cut off his spell. Then he held me up like a mob enforcer and told me in no uncertain terms: "Don't you ever, EVER, pull a stunt like that again!" The whites of the unicorn's eyes turned slightly pink, either from his magic showing itself or from his veins bulging with rage-induced blood flow. "You crossed a line today, and if you ever cross it again I will show you all of the wrath I am capable of!"

Celestia placed a comforting hoof on Shining Armor's quivering shoulder to break up our fight before it started. "Now, now, Shining Armor, he said what he needed to say. The moment is passed. I believe that your – shall we say – guest, is not the threat you consider him to be."

"Told'ja so." I folded my forelegs and nodded definitively. Content to let them all stew in how right I was, I added no further comment.

Shining Armor dropped me to the ground and stormed off to the other side of the balcony to let his arteries burst in peace.

"That being said," Celestia ominously continued. She turned my way and used her full height to instill as much intimidation as possible. It worked. "Your behavior is unacceptable. Even if you meant every word of your little speech, you still have given us very little reason to trust you. You've insulted all of us in turn, professed many disturbing opinions, and have yet to apologize for the damages you caused. For today, I am willing chalk it up to a string of accidents and misunderstandings, but if I hear of anything else you do wrong, there will be consequences. Is that understood?"

All I could do was nod dumbly. For reasons I'll never understand, her veiled threats scared me a lot more than Shiny's explicit ones. "Yes, ma'am."

Once Celestia finished her piece, her expression softened. Actually, it didn't just soften, but noticeably brighten to the point where she bore a subtle grin on her face. "Greatest king who ever lived, you say?" she chuckled. It was a genial and good-humored laugh that carried no hint of mockery. "You certainly have a ways to go. If that is the path you have chosen, then you've certainly set some high expectations for yourself. I sincerely hope that you are up to the task."

That marked the first time an Equestrian spoke to me without a lurking sense of suspicion and fear. I found myself amazed at just how much that meant to me, and in my shock I couldn't find the words to respond. While I remained mutely surprised, the princess let me be and moved to address the rulers of the Crystal Empire.

"Shining Armor, Princess Cadence," she began. "You two of you are some of the most responsible ponies I know. I shudder to think of what could have happened to the Empire if you were not here." The white mare paused to let her and her subjects prepare themselves for what she said next. "And while I realize this will be a considerable burden to you both, I must ask you to continue monitoring him. Until such a time when he is rehabilitated, or becomes a threat to your wellbeing, he is to remain under your watch."

"But-"

Celestia raised a hoof to squelch any protests. "You said yourself, captain, that we have no other options. I too am uncomfortable with how things turned out, but there are times when there are no guarantees and we must take a leap of faith. Of course, if you ever find yourself overwhelmed, or if you feel that Sombra is returning to his old ways, you need only call on me and I will come running.

"And Cadence," she mentored her adoptive niece. "What is right, and what we wish to be right, are not always the same thing. Remember that it is our promotion of harmony throughout Equestria that justifies our authority as princesses. I am not asking you to forgive him, but the first step towards harmony is tolerance. Give him a chance. We would make liars of ourselves if we did anything less."

"That goes for you too, Luna," she added after a short pause

Apparently Celestia had eyes in the back of her head, because Luna'd been giving me the stink eye while she thought her sister wasn't looking. Immature, perhaps, but I got the point: these two were a pair of god-tier mages who wouldn't even hesitate to bring me down if I ever stepped out of line.

Though quite frankly, with my luck I wouldn't so much *step* out of line as trip over it and accidently demolish another chunk of the palace. But we'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

Putting that thought on the backburner, I hooked my front legs over the railing and looked down at the ponies below. The crowd grew even larger than before and all of them watched the balcony nervously. Even though they knew that three alicorns and a military leader protected them, they still wilted beneath my stare.

My resolve hardened with every averted gaze and fearful step backwards. I now realized that this was why it had to be him, why it had to be me. I needed to be Sombra. Being anyone else wouldn't have the same impact or give them the closure they desperately needed. Sombra burdened this blameless city with a legacy of pain and oppression. I was here to soothe those fears and mend those wounds.

They will see me, and what I do, until I make those worries fade from their minds. I'll make Sombra a clown, a hero, anything but what he was. The boogeyman-like specter of dread he left was not something I could allow to exist. Heck, I'd make him a saint, if need be. Then, maybe – with enough effort – those townsfolk who ran from me, these royals who tried to imprison me, and that child who took one look at me and screamed won't ever have to be afraid anymore.

Not because destiny imposed it on me or because I believed I had a higher calling. Maybe something was out there guiding me, but I didn't need anyone to tell me what to do. I chose this because that's just who I am, and that's as good of a reason as any.

Feeling lighter and more upbeat, I left my perch at the railing and trotted over to the huddle of ponies. They seemed to be saying their farewells while Cadnece and Celestia ironed out the details of something I couldn't hear. As I approached, the latter once again extracted a promise from Celestia to intervene in case of emergency. Shining Armor, meanwhile, just stared straight ahead disbelievingly.

"You hear all that?" I slapped Shiny on the back as if meeting up with an old friend. He did not appreciate nor return the presumptuous sentiment. "We're roomies now! Glad that was cleared up, 'cause we've got a busy day tomorrow."

His neck popped no less than ten times when he turned to look at me. "… *roomies?*" he shakily whispered.

The lines under his eyes spread upwards to form a pair of perfect, dark circles. The rest of him got all fidgety and the hair stood up on his neck. If I were to tell him I invented a gun that only shoots orphans, he'd still look at me with less horror-stricken nausea.

"Well, housemates," I corrected. "Or palace-mates? Obviously, I wouldn't be in the same room as you two. You're a married couple; that'd be weird." At my hasty revision, his internal DEFCON relaxed from 'abandon planet' to 'worst day of my life.' It was a substantial improvement, but I still dealt with one unhappy customer.

"Stop it. Just stop talking, Sombra." he demanded. "If you say a single more word to me, one of us is going over the edge of this balcony. It doesn't matter which."

My mouth closed with an audible clack. Awkwardly shutting up and giving him a wide berth, I shuffled my way over to Celestia. I kept him in my peripherals the whole time in case he tried something. Sheesh, and they thought I was the crazy one.

"Yo, Celesti- *Princess* Celestia," I corrected myself before Cadence could get snooty. "I gotta say, thanks for everything. We all got off to a rocky start, and things would've been a whole lot worse if you hadn't been around."

I really owed her big time. If it weren't for her flagrant abuses of executive power, today never would've ended on a positive note. "I have merely done my job," she insisted. "Just see to it that my instincts were not wrong about you."

"No prob," I grinned. Everything was looking up. Still smiling, I walked right on up to Shiny and Cadence.

Hail to the King

"Welp, if she's heading off and it's already past dinner, you pre-electric folks will probably go to bed in a few hours. So, uh, where's my room?" I asked the assembled ponies. "Not to be too intrusive, but there's no way I'm spending the night in that cell unless you let me spruce it up a bit."

Surprisingly, it wasn't Cadence or Shining Armor who answered, but Celestia. She smiled in a way that I couldn't distinguish as genuine or covertly self-satisfied. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Princess Cadence and I have come to an agreement and some guest beds are already being prepared," she said.

And then came the obligatory stipulation. "After such an eventful day, she and her husband require some much-deserved time to themselves. You will be staying with Luna tonight."

CHAPTER
FOUR

ALICORNS DON'T GET CONCUSSIONS

Pride, when divorced from foresight and humility, is the dumbest, most self-destructive quality to ever grace our idiot heads.

"Know thy place, hellion!"

"I called dibs, and you know it!"

Case in point. Princess Luna and I didn't get along and we weren't afraid to let each other know it. Putting aside my remarkable gift for making enemies, Luna was firmly in attack mode because I – that is, King Sombra – was someone who represented everything she stood against. And as for me, the only thing I knew about Luna was that she hated my guts, so I had plenty of incentive to sink to her level. Bitterness was contagious like that. But for now, those issues were put on the backburner. There was ultimately one source of friction between us. One petty issue remained from which neither of us would relent:

One bed was bigger than the other.

"Hold thy tongue and stay thy hoof, Sombra, for only once shall this be offered: Lenience for submission, a fair trade beyond thy due!"

That was her fancy way of saying 'step off before you get hurt,' so in response I said a rude thing that does not bear repeating.

The princess gasped. "Fie thee, Sombra!"

And then she struck. Luna's blazing blue horn set the whole room alight with an indigo gleam. Her vast, ethereal powers displayed her consummate mastery of the arcane bestowed upon her by alicorn birthright. Such inherent supremacy inspired – nay, demanded – awe beyond worldly comprehension. And it was directed at me in malice. Even though she'd ditched her armor for a black and silver version of Celestia's getup, she still looked every bit the part of a harbinger of destruction. How could I, who had wallowed in the dung of mortality, ever hope to compete? Truly, there was no shame in suffering defeat from such a creature.

At least, that was how I'd describe it if anyone asked. In my book, telekinesis totally counted as 'consummate mastery of the arcane,' even when it was just used to throw pillows.

"Have at thee!"

What I didn't count on was that she could chuck those things so hard they'd knock me off the bed. Answering in kind, I put a little more oomph into my throws and we wound up playing a game of King of the Mountain with actual members of reigning and deposed royalty.

It was a matter of pride. And this had been going on longer than I'm comfortable admitting.

"OOF!" Once again I lost the high ground and Luna hopped up on the bed to re-re-re-reclaim her territory. Good god, I brought out the worst in people.

It would have been so easy to just let her have it and go to sleep. Simply giving up would've solved all our problems, but this was the mare who nearly blew out my eardrums and almost shot me point blank in the head, so I was hardly in an accommodating mood. Conversely, Luna – sovereign princess and a guest within her own protectorate – felt she was entitled to the more desirable accommodations.

"Be still, villain!" she shouted from on high. "Granted the circumstances, We've been shockingly nice. Surrender!"

"A'int happening!" Another indigo-outlined projectile zipped by my head. I aimed to win this thing so I snatched it out of the air and sent it right back. "And why are you even here? You must have loads of work waiting for you back home. You're royalty! Think of the ceaseless demands and red tape you need to cut through on a daily basis. There's a reason politicians age like yogurt, Luna. There's no way you have time for this!"

Luna's eyes took on a fiery quality for reasons that, in all fairness, I couldn't have known at the time. Being entrusted with few responsibilities in spite of her illustrious title was already a harsh blow, but the way I carelessly hinted at it felt like kick to the gut. Nowadays, Luna guided the moon, checked up on dreams, and that was pretty much it. Even her Night Court steadily became a dumping ground for whichever frivolous lawsuits got deemed too unimportant for Celestia's direct mediation.

"Silence!" she spat. "We have numerous duties befitting a princess!"

Luna launched a pillow so fast it exploded into a cloud of feathers on the wall behind me. If anyone's seen the video where that dove got obliterated by Randy Johnson's fastball, then you'd know what the impact looked like.

"Well, yeah, that's exactly what I'm saying." Confused at her outburst since she seemed to be agreeing with me, I let the interruption slide. "I'll bet that even a single day of lost productivity would cause a nightmarish backlog. How many countless subjects of yours rely on your governance every waking moment of your life? And what happens if there's an emergency?"

Luna's horn flickered out and she averted her eyes. A blush of shame began to form on her face while I prattled away. Had I been more attentive, I would have noticed her flinch at the end of every sentence.

“And is this an absolute monarchy – or biarchy, if that’s a real word – or is there some kind of senate in place? Did half the government shut down just to make sure I didn’t leave my room? Celestia said there were no kings or queens, so that means you’re at the top. How can a nation function without someone so important to the whole process!? Someone so irreplaceably vital, an indispensably requisite linchpin to the inner workings-”

Luna coughed.

I stopped my poorly informed tangent to actually pay attention and Luna seemed to be offended for some reason. What, did I say something wrong?

“Wait… ” I leaned forward, but she turned her head away even further. Despite the difficulties in recognizing alien facial features, there was no mistaking the uncomfortable guilt written all over her face. “Why’re you so… Oh. Oh I get it, none of that applies to you, does it? That’s why you were free for this house-arrest sleepover! You don’t do anything!”

A blue tinted shockwave burst from the princess, knocking everything to the floor. “Vicious slander! Our station in governance may be limited, but Our ceremonial roles are myriad and demanding!”

“Okay, so you work holidays,” I said while regaining my footing. “Other than that, what, you’re Celestia’s unemployed sibling she lets crash on her sofa?”

“We have Our own room!” A swift volley of pillows followed. “Taste retribution for thy defamatory insinuations!”

Sheer numbers and speed guaranteed that a few would hit their mark. “Stoppit! Ow! PFTT!” I sneezed out a feather. Horse noses are very sensitive and don’t take kindly to frontal impacts. Okay, note to self: Luna responded poorly to cheeky sardonicism. As she flung one pillow after another, I blindly reached out with my magic and somehow managed to snatch the very last one of them in midflight. The projectile froze in place, one half of it outlined in blue and the other with black.

“HA! Mine!” I cheered.

Luna planted her hooves and pulled mightily. “We commanded thee to relinquish!” Tugging with our horns like they were fishing rods, we heaved back and forth to claim our prize.

And I actually did a good job of it. My dark magic seemed to think that competitive frustration was similar enough to anger, so it gave me the power boost I needed to fight back. The more I thought about winning, the stronger my power grew. Victory was within my grasp.

Smugness abounded for a moment, only to be silenced once Luna decided to up her game. No, she didn’t cast some amazing spell or deliver another loquacious threat. Choosing a more direct solution, Luna slipped off her black tiara and threw it at me forcefully.

Hail to the King

"Woah! Too far! Going too far, Luna!" I dodged her lunar crown, and a second later that thing she wore around her neck smacked into the wall. It rang like a gong. "HEY! Cadence said no fighting!"

"Thou hath left Us no alternative but escalation!" Her silver horseshoe made a decent makeshift shuriken. One of them actually did connect, scoring Luna a ringer at the base of my horn.

"Luna, this is getting out of hand!" I shouted as I ducked behind a bed. Yup. We crossed a line. I guessed in Luna's almighty, nigh-invincible, pony-wizard mindset it wasn't a real fight if there was no magic involved. But to be fair, she was kind of right. That barely hurt at all.

I poked my head up from cover, Luna's shoe still dangling around my horn, to see that her barrage-slash-disrobing was finished. But that didn't mean Luna was done throwing stuff, a fact made overtly obvious by the large, square shadow closing in on my position.

I gasped. "Cheater!"

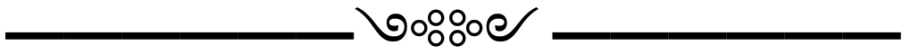
Luna spread her wings in a show of supremacy. "T'is a pillow fight, is it not? Well, a mattress is a large pillow! It counts!"

Of course, that wasn't the only thing she seized. Everyone was better at magic than me and Luna was no exception, so she had no trouble grabbing every last pillow that we'd been throwing back and forth all night. They all flanked her mattress like ships around an aircraft carrier.

Welp. I quit.

"So... what was that about offering lenience for submission?" I asked. The princess paused for a moment and actually seemed to give it some serious thought. For a mere moment it seemed like this situation could finally end. But then a wicked grin slowly grew across her face.

"Aw, crap."



*Thunk!... Bump!... Bump-*WHAM!

Princess Cadence sighed deeply and pushed her head deeper under her pillows to muffle the sound. Anxiety alone would've made this a restless night, but the incessant shouting and crashes from the guest room conspired to deny her a single moment of peace. For the last several hours, she lay flat on her belly with her hooves up to keep her appropriated earmuffs snug against her ears and eyes. Air was supplied by the tip of her nose, which barely poked out of her fortress of quietude.

"If I look over at that clock, and it says it's four in the morning, *both* of them are getting banished to the tundra."

Despite transforming her head into a slumber-turtle, the noise infiltrated clear as a bell. She used her wings to shrug the comforter on top of it all, but the sounds still came through. She wanted to sleep, her body demanded that she sleep, but she was so acutely and maddeningly *aware* of every little noise, that blissful oblivion refused to take her. How was it that the mare placed in charge of dreams shared half the credit for Cadence's insomnia?

With the exception of some of Shiny's unconscious antics – and with that reminder, she took back her share of the blanket – the princess had grown used to the silence of her nearly abandoned palace. But much to Cadence's misfortune, Luna, a mare who spent her life in fortissimo, and me, whom she considered an impulsive madman, were pretty much never quiet.

BANG!

"They aren't going to stop, are they?"

Bitterly grumbling to herself, she failed to notice the sleeping form of Shining Armor grab her with a free foreleg and plant his snout right next to her head. The contact may have been overlooked, but oh you'd better believe she heard his snoring.

"No fair."

Not only did Luna take the big mattress, she stacked them both on her bed and took all of the pillows, leaving me with just a boxspring. Her lumpy, uneven mass of cushions resembled a bird's nest more than a bed, but the satisfaction of winning it all from me made it the comfiest thing she'd ever sprawled upon. Lounging domineeringly atop her fluffy tower, she propped her head up with one hoof and let another leg dangle off the edge like a leopard in its tree.

"Fair? Is not the victor entitled to the spoils of war?" The smile in her voice could be seen, heard, and I swear to god, tasted. It tasted like snootiness. "One must recall that We won our duel most indisputably."

"Duels have set rules and an objective witness," I protested. "All you did was start a fight to take my stuff. That's a mugging!"

"Twas thou who didst incite our conflict," she asserted. The princess locked eyes with me and held it for a few moments until her gaze softened. "But alas, We see no benefit in continuing such belligerence, and some concessions may be necessary in the interests of a truce." Luna held up one of the smallest cushions in her hoard. "Here! We shall offer thee one pillow for every apology delivered."

"Are you serious?" I asked. In response Luna waved the pillow back and forth enticingly. "Nope. Not happening." I sat on the floor quite deliberately.

"No?" she asked from her perch. "Regret thou not a single action? No statements made? Mayhaps for thine unpleasant countenance?" Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Or for implying that We serve no purpose on the throne?"

Confidentially, now that we weren't in actively fighting, I honestly was sorry for that last one. It must have been a huge source of insecurity for her and it would have done an awful lot to build bridges if I did apologize, but once again pride reared its ugly head. This was the immediate, post-dispute 'I was right' phase of an argument where no one would admit fault for any reason. I wouldn't offer her any allowances and Luna wouldn't give me the slightest degree of respect, so the two of us just smoldered at each other and never took steps towards reconciliation.

"Have it thy way, then," she ignited her horn. This time, however, she didn't throw anything. Instead, her magical aura targeted me personally.

"Hey! Wait. What are we doing?" Something clicked on my armor a weight lifted itself off of my back. As the blue outline around me disappeared, I realized there was only one thing that Luna could have seized. *"You give that back right now!"* My genuine anger surprised me, but it didn't have any effect on the princess.

"Spoooiiiiils," she sang. And with that said, my cape – **MY** cape – floated up to the night princess. "My word, t'is most lavish indeed." She attached it around her neck and gave it a flick so it settled on her shoulders. "Be this real fur? How very antiquated. Such apparel fell out of favor before Equestria was even founded."

"That. Is **MY**. *Cape!* Give it back!" Dark magic wouldn't let my eyes bore holes into people, though not for lack of trying. The cape in itself wasn't the issue; it was just a piece of cloth. But it was one of the few things I could actually say I owned and, quite frankly, I had a lot of sunk cost in that thing because I blew my chance to escape by going back for it.

"Mm-Hm," she hummed absently. The princess conjured a mirror to see how she looked. "No, no. Red is simply not Our color." She set her mirror down with a big smile on her face. "Sombra, wouldst thou be terribly angry if We changed it to blue or silver?"

"Don't you dare!" I forbade most adamantly. "That's, like, a rule that everyone follows. You don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't mess with Dracula's cloak, and touching Clint Eastwood's poncho will probably get you shot! Luna, you're breaking the law!"

Having no idea what I was talking about, Luna tried, and ultimately failed, to prevent herself from giggling. "Oh, what a loathsome criminal We must be to dismiss such an esteemed mandate," she held the cape just below her eyes like an opera villain. "Truly despicable!"

"Luna! Drop it!"

So, yeah, I was pretty much begging for another round of teasing. But Luna, despite her obvious willingness to oblige, got an eyeful of my exposed flank and went quiet. First, the smile ran away from her face, then she looked confused, then she looked surprised, and then she just looked plain dumbfounded.

"…. Bweh?" Luna sounded like she just took a fistful of tranquilizers. She even let her mouth hang open.

"Hand it over!" I demanded, having not yet noticed that Luna kinda shut down for a second. "It's not even your size! You look ridiculous, Luna!"

No reaction whatsoever. "Wha… but how?" she whispered to herself.

"Luna! … Luna? Hey, uh, princess?" I'd noticed the mare's vacant expression. "You okay up there? You're, like, a few seconds away from drooling."

Luna stared. The princess gave my butt an unsettlingly intense eye-grope that should have earned her a week in sensitivity training. "Luna, this is getting creepy."

"But that's not possible." She blinked to clear the foggy glaze in her eyes. Then, as if a fire lit underneath her, Luna shot to her hooves. "We need a moment!"

With no further warning Luna dove off the bed, right over me, and dashed towards the exit. Whatever caught her attention must've been especially urgent because leapfrogging a unicorn – especially one with my horn and my crown – was a good way to disembowel herself. "Be right back! Stay there! Farewell!" Her sentences blended into one consolidated noise.

She left the room so quickly that the door shut from the rush of air. As it clicked behind her I was left alone wondering if she stormed out because I offended her or if she just needed to race to the bathroom. More importantly, though, she left the bed – the source of our hours long conflict – unguarded and unoccupied.

"I'm still taking the big one!"

Princess Cadence had no idea how her husband could sleep at a time like this. She was so preoccupied that she had to shake off the temptation to wake him up to have someone to vent to. They were all set to put the day's events behind them and try again in the morning with a fresh perspective and rested minds, but every couple of minutes brought a new interruption.

Clack-click-tak! Clack-click-tak!

And there it was, right on time. "For goodness sake, now it sounds like they're galloping around in the hallway," the princess groaned. Cadence resolved to have the whole palace carpeted first thing in the morning. Nice, quiet, shag carpet on every square inch of the castle ought to help.

Clip-clop-clip! Clip-clop Tik-tik-tik!

"That's *it*." Cadence slithered out of her husband's grip and onto the floor. Her mission set, the groggy princess shuffled across the tile to give her noisy houseguests a piece of her mind. The clacking sounded closer now. Good. If they were nearby, she could just open the door, deliver her scolding, and turn right back around. Too exhausted to bother with magic, or even lift her hooves, Cadence grabbed the doorknob with her mouth to open it.

Ah, but today's hardships just weren't done with her yet.

"Princess Cadenza!"

Luna slammed the door open so hard it smacked Cadence across the room like a pinball flipper.

"Arise posthaste!" Luna blared. **"We bare news of foremost import! AWAKEN!"**

The night princess bolted into the room uninvited to retrieve her fellow alicorn. She checked under the sheets, looked under the bed, and even hoisted Shining Armor over her head to see if the pink princess was beneath him. "Cadence? Where didst thou go?"

At the far side of the bedroom, embedded within a crater that matched her silhouette perfectly, Cadence spat out a chunk of drywall. "Ow."

"Cadence! Momentous tidings commence this eve!" Luna carelessly dropped the captain back onto the mattress. He bounced several times before settling back into peaceful slumber, having never stirred, awoke, or ever stopped snoring.

Meanwhile, the groaning pink mare dug herself out of her formfitting imprint. She was more annoyed than hurt, as such were the wonders of alicorn physiology. "Princess Luna, it is very, very late. Can this *please* wait until morning?"

Luna let the suggestion fly right over her head. "Nay!" She was so wired that her hooves couldn't stop fidgeting. "Hie thee ariseth, Princess Cadence, for We require thine immediate presence!"

"Whatever it is, we can deal with it tomorrrr... what are you wearing?" Cadence interrupted herself when she saw the state of her co-princess. Luna had been dusted head to hoof with white, downy feathers and on her back she sported Sombra's cape – and nothing else – for Celestia knows what reason.

Actually, no, Cadence amended. Celestia would be just as confused as anypony.

"Tis not important," Luna rather firmly waived it off. "But this is! Princess Cadenza, there is a cutie mark!"

Too tired to connect the dots, Cadence blinked and then looked to her own heart-adorned flank. "What of it?"

"Not you. Him!" If the night princess had to wait any longer she might end up dragging Cadence back to the guest room. By the hair if need be.

"Him?" the gears in Cadence's head finally started whirring. "...him. *HIM*?!" Okay, now she was awake. "How? When!?"

"We know not. T'was there to be unveiled when We seized his cape."

"But- He- I don't *think* he had one before," Cadence tried to remember if she ever saw my sides uncovered. "We were in such a rush at first, so nopony bothered to check. And he never took that cape off once things calmed down."

"Then see it now!" Luna flipped the other princess into the air, caught her on her back, and tore out of the room fast enough to leave a loud rush of air in her wake.

"Woah!" yelled Cadence, inadvertently using two definitions of that interjection at once. "Princess Luna, stop! It's really not that important!"

"Yea, it be imperative!"

"How?" asked the pony riding the other pony.

Luna skidded to a halt right in front of the guest room and Cadence tumbled off her back. "Implications, Cadence. Could there be a greater metric to study his motives than to see his purpose in life stenciled to his flank?"

Cadence dusted herself off and stood. "Luna, we aren't going to find all our answers just by looking at his rump." She kept her voice low so that their guest wouldn't hear. "Besides, he's not even asleep."

"We can lay him to rest at whim," Luna asserted, meaningfully pointing at her horn. She, too, started whispering since she caught on to the need for subterfuge. "Besides, we know so little of he that any hint of knowledge may help. T'is better than nothing."

Cadence couldn't argue with that. Everything they knew came with some caveat or was based on pure speculation. "This is probably a bad idea, but... alright. If you think it's that important, we sneak in to take one look, just to make sure it's nothing bad, and then we can ask him directly after we get some sleep."

"Sleep? And willfully lose consciousness in the same room as he?" Luna laughed at the thought. "Nay, We shall remain vigilant all night!"

Cadence's ears drooped miserably.

"However," Luna began. "Burdensome Our nescience to his machinations be. Aye, to know his cogitation behooveth us mightily. Iwis, foolish it be to hent not such opportunity. Agreest thou, Cadenza? Sooth to seyn, me thynketh yon kyng from myn eyen hydeth muchel."

Princess Cadence sleepily allowed her eyes to droop. "You're doing it again."

"We are transitioning!" Luna stomped. That language barrier was still a bit of an issue. Cadence made rapid 'cut it out' motions with her hooves and motioned to the door with urgency. Remembering where they were, Luna clamped her mouth shut. "We are transitioning," she repeated, this time in a whisper. "But the thought remains. He concealeth much from us, intentionally or not, and as the keeper of dreams t'is in Our power to unveil his secrets. We need only to put him to sleep."

Cadence's ear perked right back up. "Yes," she responded, not even needing to hear details of the plan. "Do that right now."

Luna wasted no time. She lit her horn, this time as a soft luminescence rather than the harsh, blinding light she'd displayed all day. She closed her eyes in focus and pointed her horn in the general direction she knew I would be. Then, after a swell of sedate cerulean, she allowed the glow to fade.

"It is done," she declared. "With as much magic as We put in that spell, We shall eat Our tiara if he is still awake."

Cadence questioningly looked to the smirking night-princess and tried not to think of the hours of lost slumber. "You could have casted that spell any time you wanted, couldn't you?"

WHUMP!

The two startled mares jumped and let out a synchronized squeak. That sound definitely came from inside the room. "Impossible," Luna whispered. "Nopony hath ever resisted Our spellcraft."

But Cadence, having been a foalsitter for many years, easily recognized that thump. "Actually, it sounded like somepony fell off a bed." As stealthily as possible, she opened the door and poked her head through. "Yep. He's on the ground. He landed on his back, too."

Luna breathed a sigh of relief. That metallic tiara would've been really crunchy. "That's good. Be he asleep still?"

"It looks like it," quietly confirmed the other princess. Cadence then peered around the rest of the bedroom. "Um... Luna, there're feathers all over the place," she observed. "And why are both mattresses on one bed?"

"'Tis not important!" Luna whisper-hissed for the second time that night. To prevent further discussion on the matter, and to hide her look of embarrassment, the night-princess barged into the room.

“With me, princess of love! Time is of the essence!” she cried. Just as quickly, though, she remembered she was supposed to be quiet. “That is, uh…” she murmured. “Follow thou Us, Cadence, for we have much to discover and no time for distraction.”

Thus, the two members of the royal family performed their sneaky, national security mission to knock someone unconscious and stare at his butt.

Both of the princesses craned their necks to the side to look at the upside-down mark. Now that it was actually in front of her, Cadence was almost afraid to find out what it might entail. She was so anxiously certain it would be something horrible that if it turned out to be a photorealistic depiction of me strangling her specifically, she wouldn’t be surprised.

In opposition to Cadence’s dreadful expectations, it instead depicted the snowflake-like symbol of the Crystal Empire sitting within the former tyrant’s crown. The crown’s curved spikes framed the Empire’s symbol like the setting of a diamond ring. Behind it, those purple, misty streams that poured from my eyes flowed around and astride the mark like the banners of medieval heraldry.

“What does it mean?” Luna asked.

“I’m not sure.”

Luna leaned in as if inspecting a museum piece. “Well… there’s a crown, and there’s the Empire, so… he… um… still considers himself king?”

“Maybe, but the crown is at the base of the symbol, not on top of it. It’s almost like it’s holding it. Or supporting it?”

“Or ensnaring it,” Luna poked said symbol, unmindful of where it was situated. “A crown represents authority, after all, and here it is surrounding the Crystal Empire.”

“I’m more concerned about the dark magic winding around it.”

They both knew this was a bad idea. Cadence was right earlier; it was common knowledge that analyzing cutie marks at a glance was invariably futile. So much so, in fact, that simply asking a pony what theirs meant had grown to become one of Equestria’s most common conversational icebreakers.

And pickup lines, but that’s beside the point.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Luna declared. “We had thought that a second opinion would clarify matters, but alas, we remain mystified. It is time for more direct measures.”

“You’re going in?”

“I am.” Luna once again brought her morphean magic to light. The brighter her horn glowed, the more translucent her body became. “We shall return once we find what We are looking for. Do not

wait for us, Cadenza, for We may be gone for some time. Return to thy room and find Us in the morrow." Her co-princess nodded in understanding.

"Okay. Be careful in there, Luna. There is no telling what you may find."

"We shall." Luna now appeared as a faint apparition, a nearly invisible phantom, as more of herself journeyed into the mindscape. "And Cadence, as a word of advice, do get some sleep. You look tired."

Cadence tried not to groan.

Luna's body fully dematerialized from their physical plane of meat and, like, hydrogen and stuff to enter the incorporeal realm of slumber. Cadence, meanwhile, took that as her cue to leave. She'd find out if Luna was successful in the morning.

Fighting back her drooping eyelids, she decided it would be too uncomfortable to fall asleep right there on the floor, a fact her sleep-deprived brain used to further justify installing that carpet. Grinning as she trotted back to the master suite, blissful silence at long last pervaded the empty halls.

Her satisfaction didn't last long, unfortunately. Once she got back to her room, the second she opened the door, her unconscious husband reminded her that he snored like a congested tiger.

Cadence groaned.

Princess Luna carried no expectations when she entered another pony's dream. Dreams were by nature private affairs, and Luna had born witness to every fear, fantasy, wish fulfilment, and perversion her subjects could conceive of. Not much fazed her these days. But as she arrived in the madness-wrought mindscape of a self-confessed alien, she prepared to endure a slew of inconceivable visions that could put Discord's most creative imaginings to shame.

Instead she saw a city. It was a particularly urbanized and developed city, but nothing terribly extra-equestrial. Luna tried not to be disappointed. When Shiny and Cadence used term 'sky scraper,' she imagined stratospheric towers that pierced beyond the heavenly firmament. Lack of architectural impossibilities aside, the only thing impressive here was the scale of development. Buildings seemed to stretch forever outward, as if the planners were not constrained by land or the need for city walls.

"This is peculiarly normal."

And there was an absolutely absurd amount of concrete. Grey streets with grey sidewalks led to towers of glass, metal, brick, stone, and even more concrete. Sombra's dreamworld displayed none of Canterlot's colorful charm: no rooftop spires of swirling purple and gold, no oversized finials depicting

the sun, no pristine white marble facades, no ornamental metalwork on every home and business, no unsupported buildings overhanging a several hundred foot drop, no Escheresque labyrinth of bridges leading nowhere, or any hint of a waterfall cutting through town.

On second thought, Canterlot was somewhat ostentatious, wasn't it?

It nagged at her how detailed the surroundings were. Dreams were about emotional impact, so typically the surroundings were as simplified and discreet as the backdrop of a play. Detail implied memory, something which should be impossible no matter how mad the king may be.

No, this couldn't be right. To alleviate her doubts Luna took to the skies. If this was a mere construct of the mind, then there had to be some cutoff point. She flew higher and higher until she would be able to see far into the distance; farther than any dreamer would bother to develop. From there, the princess beheld a bird's eye view of how the American Midwest developed its urban sprawl.

"A-ha!" she cried as she witnessed its full extent. "Repetition as far as the eye can see. Sombra hath made this all up." Satisfied by the discovery, she dove back down to the city. "And now to get to the bottom of this."

Under the assumption that the taller buildings were more important, Luna glided towards the densest section of town to start her investigation. Where to begin? Probably with that cluster of similar-looking towers or maybe the arena Shining Armor mentioned.

"Hmm?" Nevermind. Luna found something worth examining. There on the ground she saw a curious statue depicting a, uh... thing?

The princess landed on the street to get a closer look at whatever it was. Trotting right up to the monument, Luna stood face to face with the *Spirit of Detroit* and had no idea what she was looking at. It was an impressively large bronze statue sitting down with its legs folded under it. The statue had no scales or fur on its hide, making Luna believe that the creature was amphibious, and she wondered if the green tint was its actual color or just a side effect of oxidation. The arms, hands, and torso were lifted wholesale from the minotaurs, and its legs were weird; the best comparison she could draw was a young dragon before its hocks left the ground as it matured into quadrupedalism. What was the word, plantigrade?

Most jarring of all was that the face. While appearing mostly to be Sombra's original creation, it had a nose that perfectly matched those plastic joke glasses that Pinkie Pie sometimes wore. Why in the world Sombra chose that detail was a mystery she preferred to leave unsolved.

"What art those within its grasp?" she wondered.

One of its hands – the one the statue glared at intently – held a trio of little figures resembling a couple with their newborn. In the clutches of the other arm was a golden orb with thin bars radiating outward. In Equestrian statuary, such a thing could represent her sister's benevolence, the sun itself, or

even a simple mundane spell. Whatever it was, it was meant to be awe-inspiring or at least powerful. And it bothered her why the statue would hold such things. What could it mean?

Luna really, really hoped the statue symbolically held aloft two equally valued concepts, because the only other option she could think of was that the figure was going to take its energy-ball and zap the bejesus out of the tiny family in its other hand. This was Sombra's dream after all. Anything was possible.

She looked at the shape of the bronze figure, then at the ball of power in its hand, and based on Shining Armor's descriptions there was only one thing the statue could be:

"Thunder-monkey." Dumbfounded to paralysis, and mutely blinking a few times, she could add nothing beyond identifying it. Yep. Case closed. Total confirmation. "Stars above, <u>that</u> is what he thinks he is?"

Luna realized that if this was the only confirmed depiction of a human, then she was forced to draw conclusions from this one representation alone. How much of the statue should be taken literally? Was it an idealized portrayal rife with allegory, or do so-called 'humans' grow from little golden munchkins into three-stories-tall green yetis?

This was just too weird. Even though she got what she came for – proof that the new personality was genuine – she could only handle so much crazy in one sitting. That pillow fight from earlier left her with a dearth of patience, so Luna wanted out of this dream as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, as she turned to leave she saw smack dab in the middle of the road what appeared to be an enormous, disembodied fist made of stone. Curiosity seized her mind and refused to let go. Unable to resist, Luna trotted towards the monument, hoping that a second example of human artwork might clarify things for her.

She blinked, tilted her head, and scratched her chin while she critiqued the statue. "Why?" she asked, trying her hardest to find some deeper meaning than 'it's a fist.'

She stood there completely unmindful of her surroundings long enough to get lost in thought. For the life of her, she just couldn't tell what this thing was trying to say. She imagined it had something to do with... punching? Or something. Every few dozen seconds she would open her mouth to say something, but catch her words in her throat as she reconsidered. Yeah, she was lost here.

But then, as she stood there alone, something very special happened to our favorite night-pony. A tremendous thing that no other Equestrian could claim to have experienced befell our beloved princess.

Luna got hit by a car. Because you can't just stand in the street like that.

BEEEEEEEEEEEP!

With a blaring horn and furiously shrieking tires, a few thousand pounds of Motown engineering slammed into the princess of the night. She managed to leave a sizable dent in the grill of the car, but any match between machine and roadkill tends to favor the behemoth of stampeding metal. She didn't stand a chance.

Her legs swept out from underneath her, causing the blindsided alicorn to go ragdoll and bounce violently across the hood. Apparently unsatisfied with the extent of her internal hemorrhaging, Luna's barrel suffered a harsh, organ-blending impact by smashing into the windshield, which shattered completely and walloped the pony skyward. It was only her natural alicorn durability that stopped her from exploding into hamburger confetti.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAA-"

Luna careened through the air in a crazy spin, screaming the whole way, and spiraled so fast her body blurred into an indigo cyclone. She flapped her wings with all her might, but they offered no assistance and only served to make her path more chaotic. It must be pointed out that there is absolutely nothing aerodynamic about a horse, so that made the airborne distance she cleared impressive by anyone's standards.

Luna's ballistic arc came to an abrupt and snout-inverting halt when her body smacked face first into the colossal fist-monument she was looking at earlier. All of the bones from her neck up turned into delicious pudding. She didn't merely see stars. She didn't just see her life flash before her eyes. For a brief moment Luna was pretty sure she could see through time itself, because that's what happens when you headbutt a battering ram.

Thus, the princess was ejected from the dream like tequila from a freshman and Joe Louis earned himself a posthumous knockout.

"-AAAAAAAAAHH!!"

Luna scrambled on her back away from the bed, hooves barely finding purchase on the floor, until she tripped on the cape she forgot she was wearing. She could feel tiny drops of sweat forming beneath her dark blue coat and her heart beat so fast it threatened to break a rib.

This marked the first occasion in as far back as she could remember that she awoke screaming from dream. And it wasn't even her own dream. *And it wasn't even a nightmare*, a new low point for the steward of the night.

Luna patted herself down to check for injuries and felt her face to confirm that she still had all her teeth. Despite taking a blow to the head that earned her a seat in Valhalla, no blood dripped from her

forehead and she couldn't feel the dent of a depressed skull fracture. None of that was real. Deep breaths helped quell her fight-or-flight response while the phantom pains slowly faded.

Now calm, but quivering from the adrenaline, she stared at the still-unconscious cause of her face-disintegration. She thought back to the alien cityscape, the incomprehensible statues, and the roaring automobile that tenderized her innards, and in her befuddled, nerve wrecked state, Luna put aside decorum to shout the only thing that came to her mind.

"... What the buck!?"

It was a beautiful sunrise, if Celestia did say so herself. To give credit where it was due, she could never match the artistic flair of her younger sister, but ever since Luna came back, Celestia had been trying to put a little something extra into her craft. Letting her sun linger at low angles to produce rich hues of pink and gold, she wondered if it wouldn't be too indecorous to rearrange Canterlot's cloud cover so it complemented the sunbeams. She was a morning person; no surprise there.

But she had work to do, and so brought the sun up to its appropriate height. From there, the highest princess began the rest of her daily ritual: drink some tea, check her letters, and spend the rest of the day holding court. She already had her cup handy for that first and most favored task. A few centuries spent soaking in the good stuff transformed her ceramic cup into the single most potent tea-delivering mechanism in existence. Delicious.

Or at least it used to be. Luna once filled it with cappuccino and things never tasted the same. Eh, on to step two.

After gulping down her drink, Celestia hummed a cheerful tune and trotted back inside with a spring in her step.

"Oh, what's this?" Celestia's personal mail – a rarely used slot reserved for nongovernmental concerns – had a single letter within it.

The solar princess joyfully gave the letter her full attention. Twilight had been sending her fewer reports lately, so insights into her student's studies became an increasingly rare occasion. Not that she could fault her young pupil, of course. Twilight had her own life and responsibilities to keep her busy, but Celestia still found it upsetting that she had to wait such a long time between updates.

Celestia opened the scroll and, to her surprise and with a twinge of disappointment, it most certainly was not from Twilight. The writing was so abominable it might as well have been written in crayon. The text was oddly large too, in much the same way that the shaky, unfamiliar strokes of a foal needed to be huge to be remotely legible.

'*Dear Ms. Celestia*,' the letter began.

Three words in and she already had to stop. "Miss?" the princess asked aloud. She couldn't even remember the last time somepony called her that. She quickly checked to see who sent it. "Oh my, it's from Sombra? How unexpected." That explained why the scroll was left in her personal mail; Celestia ordered every correspondence from the Crystal Empire to be taken to her right away.

'I'm writing to apologize for my actions yesterday. To put it briefly, nearly every interaction we've had so far casts me in a negative light, but I swear ***on my life*** *that each one of those events was a misunderstanding, an accident, or some mix of the two. Furthermore, I've been informed that the Crystal Empire is a territory of yours, so I'm also writing to ask forgiveness for the wide swath of destruction and panic my poor showing in initial impressions and subsequent crowd control.*

... And for punching your niece in the face. And the numerous fights with Shining Armor (I think we're up to three by now). And... uh... did I do anything to Luna? Like, before you left, I mean. ...Oh! Right, the wing thing...well, add that to the list I guess. Whoops.'

Celestia reread those paragraphs to make sure they weren't a joke. "He actually wrote out the ellipses."

'Wait... oh, shoot. I can't erase anything with this quill. Uh...HEY! It won't stop! Quit writing, horn, I was just thinking to myself, not-

Please disregard the previous line; I'm still getting used to writing with the boner on my forehead ***my horn****. I'd rewrite this if I could, but I only found one piece of paper.*

Where was I? Oh, yeah:

I'm especially sorry about that incident at the end of dinner. While I'm sure we both would prefer to leave it behind us, I feel it needs to be addressed. As I am not familiar with equine standards of beauty, I cannot speak with authority, but I'm reasonably certain that your weight is perfectly appropriate for your height. So as a peace offering I sent you some nice flowers as a bribe gift so that hopefully you won't jail me for Lèse-Majesté we can leave the past behind and start anew.'

The princess glanced at the bouquet included with the letter and rolled her eyes. "He apologizes for calling me fat, but then he sends me junk food." Celestia levitated the flowers to a nearby trash bin. "What kind of weird harassment is this?"

'I know that I have made it rather difficult to trust me. And more disappointingly on a personal level, I have argued and fought with almost everyone everypony around me. This isn't normal for me, and I am assuming that the sudden transition to my new surroundings has made me somewhat testier that usual. That is not an excuse, merely an explanation, as well as a promise that things are going to improve.

Because you were right earlier: I have yet to make amends for all that stuff I wrecked. But starting today, that is going to change. I'll to talk to Cadence as soon as possible to see what I can do to help patch things together. And I swear to you in writing that I'll do everything in my power to set it right.

We've got nowhere to go but up!

Sincerely,

~~*XXXXXX*~~ *King Sombra'*

Strangely, it looked like there was a different name signed, but it was crossed out to the point of illegibility. Also included was a final thought at the very bottom, all scrunched up because the paper had run out of space:

'PS: If I'm supposed to be from the Crystal Empire, then how come I'm not all sparkly? And everyone's horn looks like a drill except mine. What's up with that?'

That last part left Celestia blinking in confusion. She set the letter down, surprised that she didn't actually know the answer. The princess was tempted to waive the question by simply thinking of the original Sombra as a normal, if particularly evil unicorn, but those dark powers and that horn set him apart from everypony else. Just what was he anyway? She and Luna turned him into a 'living shadow,' whatever that meant, as a side effect of his banishment, but he was never really ordinary to begin with.

It served as yet another reminder of how many unknowns they were dealing with.

"Well, this is promising. I think." Celestia's voice carried that rising inflection that sounded more like a question than a statement. "Cadence can keep the city together. That much I'm sure of. And Shining Armor should be able to keep Sombra in line... but that doesn't leave much room if things go wrong." The letter appeared sincere enough, but while the situation wasn't dangerous, it was certainly anything but comfortable. "Luna's report should help clear things up," Celestia sighed at the unwelcome feeling of not knowing what lay ahead. "I just hope things aren't too hectic over there."

Shining Armor was habitually the first pony awake in the Crystal Empire. Sliding out of bed at the first moments of dawn, the prince trotted to the windows to let in some fresh air. He felt oddly relaxed, all things considered. It was amazing how much a good night of sleep improved the mood.

Standing there at the window, He spared a moment to look out to the land he'd been charged with protecting. The Empire's geometric layout gave the morning rays a long, unimpeded channel to

travel down, which caused the whole east-west avenue and central plaza of the city to flare alight as the sun poked over the horizon. That light would strike the crystalline buildings and reflect each of their captivating colors over the streets in a short-lived mosaic reminiscent of stained glass. For a few minutes a day the streets of his city became a kaleidoscope. The sight was truly breathtaking.

Shining Armor finally realized just how lucky they all were. The return of Sombra was something he had nightmares about, but now that the confrontation was over Shiny felt like someone untied a rope from around his neck. Although it certainly wasn't *good* by any standard, Shining Armor had to admit that this was the best way things could have gone wrong, if that description made any sense. I caught them completely by surprise, made it into the city before anypony even noticed, and while there was extensive property damage, nopony got hurt. Shiny could not imagine a better case scenario as far as invasions went. If anypony told him a few days ago that this would happen, he'd have yelled at them for being naïve and unprepared.

As he breathed in the brisk northern air, that sense of hope and relief washed over him, tingling its way from his hooves and up his spine until it settled in his throat. Then, as was the typical response of a pony having a moment of catharsis, he sang. Yes, this is happening.

Everything seems bright within the empire.
The king is back, but somehow not malign.
Solace spreads, and spirits all rise higher.
We've dodged the greatest bullet of our time.

So our country keeps on gleaming
even with potential scheming
from an evil king we're bent upon reforming.

If he's no threat to our nation,
It's a cause for celebration!
(Given Sombra's madness isn't just performing.)

Shiny proceeded to open each of the shades to let the bright, cheerful sunrise immerse his home in golden light. His armor floated to him in his telekinetic grip, where each piece locked into place with practiced ease.

Everypony's safe here in the Empire
as long as our guest can be kept confined.
Nerves are frayed by what might soon transpire.
Though now, at least, he seems to be benign.

Since the Princess gave her order,
We are stuck with a new boarder
that we'll scrutinize until he starts conforming

Hail to the King

And those orders need abiding
so despite distrust, we're guiding
him in furthering his ethical transforming.

His slid on his officer's helmet and strapped it into place. Then he readjusted the whole suit of armor, unconsciously adding the tiniest hint of choreography to the movements.

"*Daybreak... shines u...pon... the... Crysssstallllllll...*" Shiny's next verse slowed to a halt. Something felt wrong. Even the melody that accompanied his song faded to silence.

He waited patiently, but he didn't hear the feminine, lyrical voice he expected to come from behind him. These kinds of events were hardly an exact science, but Shiny was certain that his wife was supposed to join in there.

"Cadence?" Shining Armor turned towards their shared bed to see what was the matter. "Honey, aren't you going to-"

"ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!"

The princess belted out a snore as loud as a jackhammer. Cadence's tongue lolled out of her wide open mouth where loud, ursine snarls exploded from the slumbering mare. Her comforter and blankets had been kicked to the floor sometime during the night, so she lay exposed and supine on the bed, as if asking for a belly rub. Hooves dangled every which way as she sprawled to take up as much space as possible. An absolute mess of drool and eye crust covered her face.

"*ZZZZZZZzzzzzzz.....*"

Shining Armor chuckled. "And she thinks I'm the one who snores."

With the cadence of his song ruined, Shiny figured it his job to wake his wife up so the two of them could face the unknown day together. He nudged her lightly with his muzzle, speaking unobtrusively so she could begin her day with a friendly voice. Cadence was a light sleeper so this shouldn't be too difficult.

"Cadence, today is going to be really busy so we need to get an early start."

She was somewhat less responsive than he'd expected. "*Nnnnngg.*" The blankets on the floor floated up to the princess and wrapped themselves around her as tight as a cocoon. "*Mnyeeh.*"

Not to be deterred, Shining Armor's pinkish aura took ahold of Cadence's shroud and tugged. "It's time to get up," said Shiny as he carefully peeled the blanket off of her.

"No," Cadence groused when Shiny stole her sheet. She tucked her head beneath her legs and curled into a ball. "Make it night. Tell Aunt Luna to make it night."

"I know yesterday was frantic, to say the least, but Cadence, we can't just stay in bed."

"I am awake. I'm just... lying down for a minute," her muffled voice reasserted. Mornings brought a mild form of insanity with them, causing us think that five more minutes of sleep would make us alert and well rested. Cadence was no exception to such things.

"Cadie, we really don't have time for this," the prince began, but the princess remained locked in her sleepy sphere. Shiny gave her an exploratory prod, but that just made her tighten up.

Alright, fine. If she wanted things to escalate, then two could play at that game. "You know, we still have a bunch of flugelhorns left over from the Crystal Fair. Now I'm not saying I'm going to go find one and bring it back up here, but if I just so happen to see one on my way downstairs..."

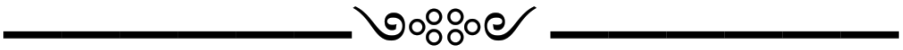
"I'm up." Cadence's head popped up. While she normally loved those sparkly little trumpets, the morning was not the right time for them. Blinking rapidly to adjust to the light, the mare oozed out of her bed so its warmth wouldn't lull her back to sleep.

"There you go," her husband smiled. "Let's take a moment to freshen up, then we can head downstairs and see how Luna's doing."

"Okay," she mumbled. The princess's horn flared to cast a well-practiced suite of spells upon herself. Her mane and tail detangled themselves, her coat straightened out, and most importantly, an autohypnosis spell slapped her eyelids open with the equivalent of a shot of espresso. It was a combination that Twilight devised to look respectable in front of Celestia after an all-night study binge, and Cadence had used it liberally over the past few months. Probably too much.

Having completed her pretty princess presentability package – as Shiny called it exactly once before the name was banned forever – Cadence dragged herself to the bathroom so she could flop into the tub and die.

Man, today was going to be an arduous one. She could feel it.



"No one told me I couldn't have bacon."

"Nopony said you could!" Luna's aggravated voice retorted. "Maybe as a garnish, but never a main course. Or even a side dish for that matter! What kind of pony orders meat?"

"But you're all, like, people-horses. I figured everything was the same unless otherwise indicated."

"Then consider thyself indicated!"

That exchange was the first thing Shining Armor and Cadence heard that day. In that one moment all the motivation they worked up that morning evaporated on the spot. "Do you want to just turn around?" Shining asked half-joking. "I don't think they've seen us." Maybe a quarter-joking.

His wife sighed deeply. “Let’s just get this over with.” Ruining her only chance to escape, Cadence poured herself a cup of coffee and also a cup of tea because she wasn’t sure which of the two drinks had more caffeine. Her eyes were so red that it was difficult to tell where the whites ended and her pink coat began.

The Crystal Princess took her seat. By then I had opened my mouth in front of Luna’s face to show her my distinctly carnivorous fangs, and argued that they meant I was an exception to ponies’ biologically enforced vegetarianism.

“You two seem awfully animated today.” Cadence tried to force herself into a good mood. “Did you sleep well?”

“Hmm? Oh, hey Princess. Morning,” I waved while Luna offered her a dignified nod. “Nah, we’ve been up since five. Probably earlier. I may have dozed off once, but weirdly enough I’m not tired at all.” Now that I thought about it, I also only ate due to routine. I wasn’t actually hungry. I’d have to ask about that.

“That’s…” Cadence’s eyes somehow felt much, much heavier. “That’s just wonderful.”

Shining Armor sat to join in the conversation. “We actually do keep some meat on hoof for ambassadorial visits. I don’t recommend it, but if you want to writhe on the toilet for a few hours, go ahead.”

My conviction, so passionate and intractable just a few moments ago, died with that one sentence. “Writhing?”

“For hours,” he nodded. “Weeping the whole time.”

My head sank from the weight of all the disappointment. “… Aw, man.” Add another point the I-hate-being-a-horse list. “Fine,” I poked the rabbit food around with a fork. “Yay, salad.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Luna graciously.

I thought that was their only issue, but Shining Armor deemed it appropriate to address the diabolic, throbbing, ensorcelled elephant in the room. “And, Sombra, there’s another thing: will you *please* use normal magic to do that?” Shining Armor pointed to my fork, which floated within my gurgling doom-aura.

“Normal magic?” Was that an oxymoron? “That isn’t what I’m doing? Everyone’s horns glow a different color, so I figured this was just how mine looked,” I pointed at the hatefully swirling mass of purple, green, and black.

“You thought that was the right way to do it?” Shining asked. He appeared genuinely baffled. It’d be like saying ‘I can’t walk. No one taught me how to use my legs.’ It also pointed out how I, or

rather Sombra's body, was so ludicrously adept at dark magic that I could use it without even being capable of the normal stuff.

"Eh, it gets the job done." I gulped down a bite of lettuce. "Is there something I'm missing?"

The captain gave me one of those looks. "You have boundless, abstruse power beyond all but the most naturally gifted magicians, and you're using it to hork down breakfast." He had been told by both Twilight and Celestia that dark magic was physically painful and exceedingly difficult: not the kind of thing that should be handled by an enthusiastic novice.

"Well yeah. No thumbs, remember? See this?" I waved a hoof. "It's not a hand. All I've got is this horn, so if you can think of a better way, I'd love to hear it." That comment dimmed the whole conversation to silence. The ponies still weren't used to the idea of an alien phantom body-swap and preferred to shy away from the concept lest they have to think about it too hard.

The lull in conversation let us notice the princesses holding a covert discussion.

"And what are you two whispering about?" I asked, but the mares quieted down and kept their mouths shut. "Well? Not gonna share, huh?" Since I was the type who can't tolerate long, awkward pauses, I tried to think of something to keep our talk kindled. "Soooooo.... Uh, by the way, what were the two of you doing last night?"

The alicorns went stiff. Luna audibly gulped and Cadence's dual-wielded cups dipped from her aura like stalled airplanes. "W-what are you talking about?" asked Cadence. "We didn't do anything."

"Yes," Luna reinforced her innocence with a strained, quivering grin. "T'was probably a dream. Pay it no heed."

The two of them did a terrible job of looking inconspicuous so Shining Armor looked back and forth between the three of us. "Did I miss something?"

"Yeah, but it's nothing important." I motioned to Luna and Cadence. "I heard these two clopping outside my door last night, so I'm asking for details."

The already stiff princesses became dangerously quiet. The awkward silence became angry silence, and those who haven't had to learn the difference between the two were probably better at social situations than me. Some laborious ticks of the clock later, Cadence buried her head in her forelegs. "By Celestia, he heard us," she grumbled. "All of that sneaking around for nothing."

"What? Was that supposed to be a secret?" I asked. "This castle is practically empty, so of course I could hear everything. Hooves on tile ain't exactly silent."

"Sombra," Cadence rubbed her forehead in deep, therapeutic circles, "Please. Not today. Just please stop talking."

Hail to the King

"Hey, don't clam up now. We're finally having a real conversation. No yelling, no interrogations, or anything. So c'mon tell me. What'd you do to make Luna yell so much?"

After sighing deeply, Cadence scooted out of her seat, washed her hooves of the matter, and promptly about-faced to leave the dining hall. "Nope," the princess declared. "It's way too early for this. It's too soon for things to already start going wrong. Shining, I'm going to have to take a rain check today."

The captain left the table to chase after her. "Cadence, wait," Shiny called out to his wife, but she refused to slow down. "We still have to keep an eye on him."

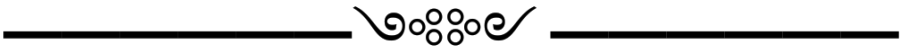
"Don't care. I'm not doing it." She didn't yell or enunciate. It was a simple, dispassionate statement that told us she wasn't dealing with another moment of this crap. Cadence knew it was all going to get worse from here on out, and since there was no use staying on a sinking ship it was best to leave now.

Split between his retreating wife and self-stated responsibilities, Shining Armor vacillated indecisively before pleading to Luna. "Princess Luna, can you please watch him for a bit longer? I'm sorry if it's too much to ask, but I need to go talk with Cadence."

If he had phrased it any other way, she might have refused. But that statement, 'too much to ask,' and its unintentional challenge made Luna recall my taunt last night that she had no responsibilities as a princess. Pride. Stupid, self-destructive pride.

"Worry not, captain," she eagerly devoured the bait that Shiny didn't even know he laid. "We are more than capable of handling him for as long as necessary. T'is no problem at all."

"Thank you, princess. This means a lot." He barely finished his thanks before dashing off to find his wife. "Cadence! Honey, wait up!"



And that was why I had to tag along with Luna all day. True to her word, the princess watched me like a hawk both throughout breakfast and afterwards. She kind of overdid it though, walking behind me so I'd stay totally within her line of sight. They say a watched pot never boils, and I now knew why; it's constantly feeling that icy tingle of being observed.

"So which one's her office?" I asked Luna, who remained silent. The last three rooms I peeked in were unoccupied, and apparently had been for a long time. In fact, for such a regal tower a majority of the place looked abandoned. "Cadence?" The door I opened led to the most important looking room on this floor, which I figured was royalty's natural habitat. This one was actually furnished. Score. "Yo, Cadence, you here? Or, I mean, whatever it was you told me to call you. Princess... Costanza?"

She only said it once in passing. Anyway, I looked around for the swirly-maned princess to basically ask her 'hey, I wanna save the world. How do we make that happen?' She surely had some kind of odd job I could handle. Really any kind of starting point would help.

She wasn't there, but I saw something just as good. Sitting on Cadence's desk was a huge pile of paperwork labeled 'to do' stacked taller than she'd be able to reach. My inchoate plans possessed no real direction or endgame, but if I could piggyback some of the empire's concerns onto my ill-defined, yet all-consuming mission, then maybe I could earn acceptance into their community faster than I thought.

"Let's see what we got here," I swiped some of the recent additions.

"Sombra, return that at once!" protested an irate Princess Luna.

"I'm just looking, relax. Okay, we got daily expense reports...Yadda, yadda, yadda... agricultural yields, building permits, et cetera, et cetera..." I skipped down "Ah, here we are: Current scope of damage. Let's look at the cost."

My legs buckled.

I was so floored by the bad news that my knees went all jelly-like. "Oh man, they're gonna sue the crap out of me." Cadence wrote a small footnote at the bottom of a page reminding her to 'ask Twilight how they level and rebuild Ponyville so quickly.'

Luna peered over my shoulder and let out a low whistle. "Quite a sum, indeed. And that be a mere estimate. You're doomed."

"Yup." My eyes never strayed from the string of zeroes at the bottom of the page. The rest of my motor functions shut down while I read.

I never imagined the destruction was so extensive. It was going to take a huge amount of capital and man-hours to fix. I didn't know off the top of my head how much time a city needed to recover from a disaster, but I did know that if the DOT needed a whole month to fill a pothole, then damage at this scale would be unimaginable. The next several pages itemized a full list of damaged properties.

"Oh, my god, I did this," The more my eyes moved down the paper, the closer I came to throwing up. "This one was somebody's home. And-and this one was a store. And another house. And another! And," I gasped, "I leveled a soup kitchen!" Consequences from my actions would last for years! I can't just take that back. "Here I was thinking I could help these ponies, but Jesus, how can I even speak to them? After everything I ruined? I can't even begin to make amends for this! Can this even *be* fixed? I can't just wish away the devastation or instantly repair it as if by magic!"

Several moments passed before I had one of those light bulb moments.

Hail to the King

"...Wait." I looked up at the horn sticking out of my head. "Maybe..." I contemplatively put a hoof to my horn while rereading the damage report. "These costs are mostly for building repairs. That's what Shining Armor and I were doing all day yesterday. For free."

A smile slowly formed on my face. "I can do that." Was this hope, or was I just fooling myself? I set down the paper to look at the princess, smiling widely. "Hey, Luna. I just got the best idea."

"No." She responded before my sentence was completely finished.

"But I- Look. Just hear me out." I thought she'd be more open than that.

"*No*," she repeated. "We can see where this is going. Do as thou art told, nothing more, and abjure thyself of thy fickle motivations."

"Fickle?"

"Aye, fickle and impulsive. We have been told that thou art to be pacified, monitored, and secured at all times. We happen to agree with that assessment, especially after the scenes thou didst cause."

"But I can't just stand here! Not when I had that whole massive epiphany yesterday." No matter how passionately I argued, Luna remained unswayed. I knew from experience that she was the obstinate type, so I switched tactics. "Think of the crystal horses! They had to go to bed last night knowing that their boogieman was alive and well, and living in the center of town. Can you live with that? I can't. "

"The crystal ponies hath entrusted their security in Princess Mi Amore Cadenza and Prince Shining Armor," she responded plainly. "Their faith be well founded."

"I said *I* can't live with that. Lady, I'm regretting most of the stuff I did, wallowing in guilt for stuff I *didn't* do, and no one will shut up about how much they hate me. I gotta do something to stop this."

"Such things cometh with patience, but now be not the time."

"Easy for you to say!" I snapped. "You're a beloved princess from a peaceful kingdom. What could you possibly know about the need to redeem yourself?"

Hoo boy did I feel a chill right there. Her expression never changed, but I got the distinct feeling that I crossed a line big time. Luna put on one of those too-emotionless faces that people only use when they're playing poker or are mad at their boyfriends.

"Our knowledge of such things be more profound and intimate than thou couldst possibly imagine," she responded with stonelike coldness.

For once, I noticed the obvious social cue and my instincts screamed at me to change the subject. "Well, uh, that's good, right? So you understand why I can't be cooped up in here." I cleared my throat

and changed tracks. “Speaking of that, you’re higher up than Cadence and Shining are, right? Like, in terms of authority?”

Luna pondered my words cautiously. This didn’t feel like deception, but it was definitely going somewhere. “As much as it would clash with Our sister’s egalitarian sensibilities, there be many who would say that, yes. We be a princess of Equestria, and the Empire be wholly dependent upon Equestrian aid.”

“So you can make a judgment call if you need to?”

“We do not appreciate the leading questions. What do you want?”

I held Cadence’s paper up to Luna’s face. “I want to do something about this.” Luna took the sheet and read it over. “I figured could just magic up some repairs for no cost as a way to make up for yesterday. It’s my mess, after all. They get their houses fixed, I get to promote myself, and Cadence doesn’t have to spend a dime. Everybody wins!”

Though still unconvinced, Luna hummed appreciatively. The establishment of personal responsibility was a welcome addition to Equestria’s rogues gallery, since more often than not Canterlot had to foot the bill once the damage was cleared. “A laudable decision, but forgetest thou thine imprisonment. Thou canst leave not this building.”

“Yes I can. Remember how prisons don’t work on me? The new rule is one of you royals has to be with me at all times. They never said anything about staying here in the palace.”

I was *completely* wrong about that.

It was, however, my honest understanding at the time. Unbeknownst to us, Shining Armor assured the whole town yesterday that I’d stay safely locked away. So when you get down to it, everything that follows this sentence could have been avoided if Shining Armor had bothered to tell that to Luna and me.

“Be that so?” Luna asked. If everything I said was true – which it wasn’t, but neither of us knew that – then technically, yes, my plan was doable.

“Yup. We’re all good here.” I nodded happily. “So,” I eased up to Luna all buddy-like, “since you’re here – a member of royalty; I can tell by the tiara – what’s say you and I head outside and do some good for the community?”

The princess hesitated. “We are uncertain. Shining Armor asked Us to keep an eye upon thee.”

“And that’s exactly what you’re doing,” I asserted. “Come on, weren’t you upset about not having enough responsibilities? You and I have a chance to make a real difference here. What do you say?”

"We," she sounded conflicted and hesitant. But with a couple glances to the expenses sheet, Luna sighed and nodded her head. "We suppose that makes sense." Luna, unaware that she wasn't supposed to do this, agreed. She knew about the Crystal Empire's financial situation and assumed that Cadence would have done the same.

"Awsome! Let's do this thing!" I immediately made for the exit only to get snagged by Luna's magic field.

"But first a warning." She stepped forward, spreading her wings to make herself appear larger and more intimidating. "If thou bringst anypony to harm, then no matter Our sister's will on the matter, Our tolerance shall end. Heed my words, Sombra, else We drag thee to the open plains and summon a meteor. We have been interred in Canterlot for the past three or four malefactors to blight our subjects, and quite frankly, We are rather eager to test Our might."

"... point taken." Deep as my voice was, it could still squeak. Just not that well. "Okay, Luna, I promise nobody gets hurt."

"*Princess* Luna," she insisted. "And we shall hold thee to thy words."

Mere seconds after we left, to the point where they probably should've seen us in the hallway, Cadence and Shining Armor entered the office. Thanks to her husband's encouragement, the princess worked up enough forbearance to hold back her insomnia, stress, and overwhelming responsibilities to let them quietly develop into an ulcer rather than prevent her from getting work done.

"I'm sorry, Shiny, I shouldn't have walked off like that. Maybe I'm overreacting, but I just can't face him like this. At any other time, it would have been a different story, but not now."

This was a period of reconstruction where even the slightest mistake would irrevocably alter the Empire's fragile destiny, and Cadence worked herself to the ragged edge of her body and mind ensuring that everything ran perfectly. These were times for the history books. Every day she tiptoed on a gossamer tightrope, and I cannonballed right in the middle of it. So yeah, she was in a bit of a tiff.

Shiny walked to her side to give her a supportive embrace. "It's alright, hon, we all understand. The empire knows how much you've done for it. If anypony deserves a break, it's you."

She smiled for a moment, enjoying the comfort. "Thanks, but I still feel like I'm shoving my problems on everypony else."

"They're our problems, Cadence. I'm here to help whenever you need me."

Princess Cadence's warm smile widened. That husband of hers, he made days like these tolerable.

Now began her daily task of legislating, administrating, building, maintaining, and arbitrating a whole country almost entirely by herself. What fun.

One way or another modernization will come to the Empire, and the clock was ticking for Cadence to make the Equestrian way of life palatable to the crystal ponies before cramming it down their whimpering throats. Success was limited, as shown by the stream of proposals Cadence had to deny:

No, you can't raid the diamond dogs for plunder and glory; No, we won't criminalize emigration to prevent more farmers from leaving; No, you can't dump explosive materials in the dried out well at the edge of town; No, you can't apply for senior citizen's benefits even if you've technically been sealed for a thousand years; No, we won't invade our neighbors just to show the world the strength of our military. The list had no end in sight. Every time she finished a task, new matters would be found in its place.

Speaking of which, there was a new note left in the middle of her work area.

"What do we have here?" she picked it up. "'Fixing everything. Out with Luna. Back by lunch. – Sombra,' He's with Luna? Oh good, she's watching him."

Let's put a thirty-second countdown on the clock.

Cadence opened her window. Even though the sun stung her tired eyes, the sight brought a smile to her face. Everything remained as safe and normal as it was the previous morning. "You know, Shining, maybe it isn't as bad as I've been thinking," she began. "Maybe Celestia was right, and some good can come from this after all."

"That's the spirit, Cadence. Tell you what, I know you have an awful lot more on your plate than I do, so once Luna's gone, I'll keep handling Sombra myself until you tell me you're ready."

"Would you?" Cadence hopefully asked. The nineteen-hour workdays demanded by her position didn't leave room for anything else, at least not until things calmed down. Before he could answer, however, she shook her head. "No, you shouldn't. As princess, I share responsibility," Cadence sighed. "I do need time today, though. I have a lot of bills to review and proposals to read."

"That's okay. Take as long as you need. Those files won't address themselves," he tipped his head to the paper pillar on the desk. "Speaking of which, what did that letter say?"

And the countdown reached zero.

"It says that Sombra is outside with Luna. She's watching him just like you asked. He-" Reality smacked Cadence upside the head with a firm, open-handed slap.

Shining had a similar epiphany if his bugged out eyes were to be believed. Both ponies shot to the window so fast they nearly threw themselves over the sill. "*They're out in the city!?*"

Hail to the King

"How!? How could this have happened?" Shining Armor yelped. "We're smarter than that!"

"Oh no, Luna didn't think 'give him a chance' meant Sombra got off scot-free, did she?!"

The couple shouted back and forth at each other, each reared on their hind legs to grab the other by the shoulders to demand answers. "That's it, isn't it?" Shining Armor gasped. "She's projecting her Nightmare Moon experience on him! We left him with the one pony who'd be sympathetic!"

"But she was corrupted back then, and he's just plain evil!"

"She might not see the difference!" Shining dangled out the window to get a better view. "He couldn't have gotten far. Where did he go!?"

Princess Cadence had to yank him back in when he stretched too far. "We have to get out there! And we need a plan to get them back in the palace!" the princess cried. "What are we going to do?!"

"I don't know! Luna *was* our plan to keep him in the palace!"

"Then think of something! Please tell me you have some kind of procedure in place!" Cadence begged, barely inches away from her husband's face. "You're the head of our military! Fix it!"

"I- I'll send out a search party!" Shining Armor bolted past his wife so fast she spun like a top. The captain didn't notice, being too busy sprinting and screaming his head off. "GUARDS!"

Once she stopped spinning, Cadence regained her footing and dashed after her galloping husband. "Wait for me!"

Buildings in the Crystal Empire were formed by the mad fever dreams of Fred Flinstone's architect. Each house was a giant, hollowed-out gemstone with a few windows and doors attached to them. The place looked like a glistening Cappadocia, or a sparkly version of those cliff-houses in the Southwest. Luna and I nonchalantly wandered into the main plaza of the city totally unmindful of the scene we were making. Neither of us were much for subtlety, and we both severely underestimated how big of a deal of our presences were.

"You know, until now I haven't had a chance to really see the place. It's nice."

"Aye," Luna nodded. "The world regained a jewel with the Empire's return. Our sister and Princess Cadenza are working to encourage tourism and cultural exchange."

The crystal ponies avoided us. Some bowed to Luna before making their getaway, but they all fled. It wasn't the desperate run for their lives like yesterday, but even with the relative peacefulness I don't think anyone came within fifty feet of me. That was a real shame because there were a few market

stalls I wanted to check out. After yesterday's speech, they knew I wasn't the same dictator as before, but that in no way implied I was harmless.

Luna ate it up. Simply being there made her a source of security for an entire city. It was a welcome reminder that no matter how far beneath her sister's shadow she may be, she was still a princess of Equestria and her little ponies looked up to her. She did her best to maintain her stoic, regal composure, but little flashes of excitement broke through whenever a crystal pony would first look at me and be afraid, but then look at Luna and calm down. Luna's wings ruffled, the corners of her mouth rose just enough to be called a smile, and every step in her stride was more confident than the last.

She was a relic of a distant past, and so too was the empire. These equally time-displaced ponies offered her a sense of solidarity she could find nowhere else. Nopony found her mannerisms confusing, they were completely disconnected from the Nightmare Moon incident, and they all shared in the common struggle of adapting to a world that left them behind long ago. If Princess Cadence wasn't so well versed in the modern political scene Luna would have gleefully seized the reigns of the Empire. Heck, she already had the shimmering mane.

"Ooh! Luna, look. That guy didn't run." I happily trotted – or was it cantered? I didn't know horse terminology – over to a food stall. "Sup, buddy, what are you selling? Looks good. Hey, Luna, you want one?" I didn't even care what it was; I was just excited to be talking to somebody. "So I don't have any money. Do you take I.O.U.'s? I'll trade you for one of the spikes on my crown."

The stallion refused to answer.

"Dude, are you just going to ignore me?" I poked the stallion so lightly I barely touched him. He wobbled back and forth like a statue about to topple over. Since I was once kicked out of a museum for a similar incident, I made sure to catch him and plant him firmly back on his feet. The guy remained so frozen with fear that his entire body locked up. "Well that's disappointing."

"Indeed," Luna agreed. "We begin to think this outing was a mistake."

"Nah, don't say that yet. We only just got started. Relax, Luna, as long as you're here nobody will overreact." However, something was nagging me in the back of my mind. "Though, admittedly, I did have this weird dream last night where I ran someone over. I hope that wasn't a bad sign."

Luna whirled around. "That was y-!?" She bit her tongue. Angry as she was, Luna didn't want to reveal that she'd been spelunking in my brain.

"You say something, princess?"

"T'was nothing," she brushed it off. "Let us focus on the task at hoof."

"... kay." Luna was a bit of a weirdo. "So, should we go with something easy or with something that'll make more of an impact? 'Cause I'm thinking we need something *big* to get people talking."

Luna's cautious optimism cooled to the brink of doubt. "Thou seemest rather motivated, but dost thou think it wise?"

"Yeah. I can't explain why, but ever since I came here I've been *burning* with ambition. Good thing too, because now that the initial shock is over, the ponies don't know what to think of me." I hoped. "Everything they know comes from that speech I gave yesterday, so I gotta strike when the iron is hot. We all know how important first impressions are – or, like, second or third impressions by now. But still, I've got something kinda, sorta, close-ish to a clean slate, right?"

As if to answer me, the scared-stiff stallion at the food stall toppled over, still so petrified that his legs remained perfectly straight.

"T'would seem your new friend disagrees," Luna's hoof covered her smirk.

"I can take a hint, buddy, no need to be dramatic," I magically righted him back up. "Okay, new plan. This guy makes a good point. Let's go with something easy, and then slowly build our way up."

The princess and I began discussing the plan for today's outing. Terrified street vendors aside, there was no reason not to be confident. Luna had things well under control, and as long as I kept her by my side nothing could go wrong. She was a responsible pony and never once let me out of her sight. She understood my motives, she was strong enough to handle any contingency, and she was more than capable of keeping the Empire calm, so the princess became my all-purpose trump card to any problem I could imagine.

Besides, Luna was at the highest level of government – someone who could bat away complaints with a swing of her executive privilege. It wasn't like this outing was going to cause some huge, wildly uncontrollable situation or anything.

"Troops, we have a situation!"

Shining Armor paced in front of a line of guards in purple barding. Every one of them stood ramrod straight, eyes focused straight ahead, as their leader briefed them on the severity of recent occurrences.

"Sometime this morning Sombra escaped from the Crystal Palace!" Or just up and left, but he wasn't about to tell them that. "I know you've heard the rumors of his mental state, and while there is some truth to them, the former king, Sombra, is still an extremely dangerous pony," he made sure to add a pause between king and Sombra, "if we are to recapture him, we need to be extremely cautious."

Princess Luna confirmed that the personality was genuine, but that didn't mean he was about to start trusting me. Shiny could admit that he was being somewhat excessive in his precautions, but he was

equally convinced that some paranoia was perfectly justified. Equestrian psychology held a lackadaisical 'let 'em walk it off' sort of attitude towards mental illness because most of their psychoses lasted as long as the flu. So even if the new personality wasn't an act, the real Sombra may be lurking in my subconscious ready to pounce at any second. Or so he believed.

"But first we have to find him. Scour the streets in pairs. Absolutely nopony is ever allowed to be by himself. I want this done methodically and efficiently, and I need scouts in the air right now!" He expected a chorus of 'yes, sir's but only received some confused muttering. "... I said NOW!"

"The air, sir?" asked a definitively ground-bound pony.

For a brief moment, the warhorse snapped out of his drill instructor persona and made a quick double-take at his assembled troops. "That's right," he mumbled under his breath, "wrong army." It was difficult being an officer for two countries at once. "We need to recruit pegasi for the guard. I swear, the first one to sign up gets promoted on the spot."

"I have a question, sir. Are we doing this as royal guards, police, or soldiers? Because I'm still not up to speed on how due process works."

Ah, yes. Another reminder that his armed forces came from a time when anypony nourished enough to support the weight of the armor was considered prime soldiering material. The captain had some difficulties molding them into a respectable peacekeeping force.

"Just follow the tips on the cheat sheet I gave you and try not to draw your weapon unless necessary," Shiny responded. With that interruption out of the way, Shining Armor the captain was back. "Ahem. Your first priority is maintaining the peace. We do not want things to escalate. If you find Sombra, call for reinforcements by sending a flare spell into the ai- Oh, wait, no unicorns either. Hmm... well, then we'll use some other kind of signal. I'll think of something. We're going to need a lot of horsepower to bring him down, so *do not confront him alone*. Send word out immediately!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Once Sombra is located, keep him occupied until Princess Cadence or I arrive. Princess Luna should be with him, so ask for her assistance. We will not have a repeat of yesterday's events. Get out there and keep the Empire safe! Is that understood?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Princess Luna and I, after much deliberation, decided that the only bad decision was indecision. So instead of wasting any more precious moments, we walked right up to the house we happened to be in front of at the time to see if they had anything I could help with. Sure, it wouldn't be the huge, attention-grabbing start to my glorious quest, but, hey, baby steps.

Hail to the King

"Wait," I said as Luna was about to knock on the door. "How 'bout you go in first?"

"Getting cold hooves at the very last moment, art thou?"

"No, it's just these ponies are kinda skittish." That understatement was large enough to constitute a choking hazard. "Yesterday, I saw one guy bust through a wall to get away from me. Maybe you can soften the blow? Like, go in there first and make sure they aren't the type to shriek and run for the hills."

My unrelenting meliorism aside, I recognized from personal experience that situations often escalate and run violently out of control. And given that my stay in Equestria was nothing *but* situations running violently out of control, we needed to be careful. No more rashness this time. Punctilious precaution prevents pandemonium.

Luna, despite preferring a more direct approach, nodded a reluctant affirmative and knocked on the door while I found a place to hide.

From within, we heard a voice. "Who is it? I'm in the middle of something right now, so if you could come back later that'd be," the door opened and the occupant saw the full majesty of Equestria's coregent standing on her porch, "...great."

"Well met, citizen," Luna greeted. Again, she severely underestimated her own social station.

"P-princess Luna! Why are you-? I mean, I," the mare sputtered and remembered to bow. "I-I wasn't expecting guests. I mean, what an honor. Uh, come in! Come in."

The two entered the house and I tried pressing an ear against the wall to listen in. The stone, however, was too thick to eavesdrop so I wound up sitting there, waiting to step out of the bushes of this stranger's house to prove I'm not sketchy.

Hmm, I just reviewed that last sentence in my mind. This plan may not have been as clever as I imagined. Sheesh, what if someone just happened to walk by and saw me?

Luckily, the door cracked open minutes later to reveal Luna smiling confidently. "Thy worries were for naught!" she cheered. "She appears perfectly amicable. Come inside so that We may introduce thee."

"Great. That's good to hear," I stepped out of my hiding place and into the house. "So what are we dealing with?"

"See for thyself. We believe her to be an artist, as thou can infer from the prolific artwork about the walls, or perhaps a sculptor specifically, since her latest work takes up much of her living space." True to Luna's words, smack dab in the living room, half-complete and hung up on a stand, was a large straw horse which could easily have been mistaken for the planning stages of a sculpture.

Unfortunately, upon closer inspection something looked wrong. The glorified haybale looked as disposable as it was flammable. It was also incredibly minimalistic, with only its extremely recognizable crown and horn – an ice cream cone painted red – to hint at whom it was supposed to represent.

I blinked, and then blinked some more as the general 'oh crap'-ness sunk in. "Jesus, Luna, we really messed up. We gotta go. Now."

"So timid?" Again with the teasing. She didn't see what I saw. "Art thou truly so afeared to meet a harmless mare after such boisterous resolve?"

"Luna, that's an effigy."

The princess scoffed. "Jump not to conclusions. T'is obviously a model used to study the equine form. She is an artist. Wherefore else would she have so many torches for lighting, so many sharp tools for carving, and so many pictures of her subject, which... actually looks like you, doth it not?" Luna sounded less certain of herself. "... And upon second glance, that stand somewhat looks like a gallows. And there be an awful lot of kindling to yond corner. And a bucket of," she sniffed, "kerosene?"

There was also a stack of invitations for a Burning-of-the-King-Slash-Weekend-Block-Party. 'Bring the kids!' Yep. Luna saw it now. Effigy. "Oh, my."

The princess slowly passed her eyes across the room, this time paying attention to the content of the 'prolific artwork.' Hoof-drawn posters covered the walls with pictures of me and jingoistic slogans like 'Freedom for the Empire,' 'Sacar la Sombra!' and 'This is not a joke: If I ever see Sombra again I am going kill him.'

"Oh, dear," Luna finally grasped our circumstances. "We may have picked the wrong house."

"Ya think!?" This was supposed to be an easy one. Baby steps! Baby steps aren't supposed to walk you off a cliff!

That was when we heard the sound of dishes shattering on the floor behind us. There stood a fairly standard crystal pony mare – glittery coat, elaborate hairstyle, passionate distaste for yours truly, et cetera – with wide eyes and a trembling hoof pointing straight at me. "You!"

The combination of trying to scream and gasp at the same time made a loud, raspy croak in the back of my throat.

Luna stepped forward to try diplomacy. "Hold! We have brought Sombra here as a portent of redemption. Hear Us before judgment is passed!"

Nope. That didn't work.

"Sombra!" the mare screamed. She grabbed her tray table off the ground with her teeth and chucked it like a Frisbee.

Hail to the King

I ducked behind the princess. “See, Luna! This is exactly what I was afraid of!” The owner of the house pursued, even hurdling over said night-pony, and forced me to run around the room to get away from her.

“Tyrant! Fiend! OUT, OUT, OUT, OUT, OUT!” She snapped at my tail with chomping teeth. “Get out of my home!”

“Then stop chasing me!”

As I ran from her in circles, knocking stuff over to drop obstructions in her way, Luna kept calling out to the terrified mare. “Peace, citizen, We are fairly certain that Sombra is not dangerous! Thou wilst probably not be harmed!” the princess tried, but there was just no consoling her. “He is here to make amends, not bring harm upon thee!”

“Lies! He followed me! He’s in my house. IN MY HOUSE!” the crystal pony ranted. She began throwing dishes, furniture, and whatever she else could get her hooves on. “He knows! He has to know! Why else would he be here? He knows I was the one who passed out those torches!”

“Holy crap! Luna, we gotta get out of here!” Using the only trick I knew with any semblance of competency, I magicked up a large black crystal to shield me from her assault. It did its job, but from my position it ultimately made things more difficult, as was par for the course.

“He blocked the door! There’s no escape!” Since fighting didn’t work, her instincts switched to flight. The panicking pony leaped onto Luna’s back and bear-hugged the princess to near suffocation. Luna squeaked like a doggy toy. She then seized one of Luna’s wings and covered herself like she was hiding from monsters under a blanket. Luna tried to pry her loose, but she was just too squirmy to get ahold of.

I, meanwhile, tried to argue the latest accusation against me. “I did no such thing! I didn’t block it, I partially obscured the door, at best.” She should be more upset about the huge black spire I made erupt from her floor. Incidentally, I didn’t know how to get rid of those crystals without blowing them up.

If she seemed a bit out of sorts, keep in mind that this was an ordinary, run-of-the-mill citizen. According to every book she’d read, when a mighty, black creature of shadows came to her doorstep, things get either horrifying or racy and it wasn’t looking like it was the latter.

“I’m trapped! This is how it begins!” she rambled. “Or ends, maybe? *This is how the end begins!*”

“No it doesn’t. I’m just standing here waiting patiently.”

“Looming threateningly!” she insisted.

“Can we split the difference at loitering suspiciously?”

Luna finally got ahold of her. "***Enough!***" the princess shook earth with her voice. "You," she seized the mare with her magic, "and you," she did the same with me, "End this folly at once!"

From where we involuntarily floated in front of the blue alicorn, the two of us looked at each other and mutually decided we weren't done yet. "She started it."

"No, he did!"

"What? How? You're the one who went all nuts on us."

"You're trespassing on private property!'

"I was invited in!"

"Only because I didn't know it was you!"

"**Need I repeat myself?!**" Luna thundered. And I meant that literally. The night princess conjured up a miniature storm within the confines of the house. "Now you two," she pushed us close until our cheeks mushed together, "get along."

"But-" we both complained.

"**NOW!**"

The crystal pony squeaked and wrapped her forelegs around me. Luna made her presence so forceful that it overrode the other mare's fearful instincts.

The princess glowered at me until I returned the embrace.

Personally I didn't think it counted when a hug was made under duress, but it seemed to satisfy her. Now baring a happy, supportive smile, Luna gently placed us back on the ground. If the princess learned one thing from her sister's hoard of friendship reports, it was that ponies became eternal besties after they force their issues on each other. (And, also, that Celestia had a serious problem with living vicariously, but that was for another day.)

"There. Are not things so much easier when we all get along? Sometimes, even the most zealous of foes can be a misunderstood friend. So, Sombra," Luna lightly nudged me to face the mare's direction. "Is there something thou wouldst like to say?"

"Not really, I just want to get out of here."

Luna's storm cloud rumbled.

"I mean, I'm sorry I didn't warn her first," I recanted. Luna nodded happily and stopped the thunder. Turning back to the crystal pony, I sighed sadly. "I thought if I could force someone into a one-on-one conversation, they'd see how serious I was about fixing everything. I figured that if no one would give me a chance, I'd have to steal it. Guess that plan backfired."

Luna nodded again. “We appreciate your candor. And you, miss, be there anything thou wouldst like to add?”

The crystal pony looked like she had something she wanted to get off her chest, so the princess sat there, waiting for friendship to bloom the same way spontaneous combustion did; suddenly, inexplicably, and with life-altering consequences. I nervously grinned and waited for her to make the first move. The mare, after some moments of hesitant consternation, slowly returned my uneasy smile.

The shutters burst open and belched me on the street outside. “Oof!”

“*And stay out!*”

The mare kicked me out of her house. Normally, ‘kicked out’ was an exaggerated euphemism for being politely asked to leave, or, at the very worst, escorted out the door. But when I said she kicked me out, I meant she reared up on her forelegs and mule-kicked me straight through a window.

“That,” I coughed, “could have gone better.”

But, as it turned out, it could also get a whole lot worse. Looking up, I saw a few dozen pairs of eyes focused squarely on me. When Luna and I entered that house, the crystal ponies were understandably concerned, so a small crowd of onlookers formed. A crowd which I landed in the dead center of. They were no longer mere bystanders and none of them knew how to handle it. If I moved, the crowd moved. A perfect donut of ponies kept their distance.

The door opened behind me and Princess Luna stepped out. “How unfortunate. We had thought Ourself a better judge of character than that. Sombra, should we try another home, or…” She saw the crowd. “Oh, swive me.”

Luna’s horn lit up in case a fight broke out. She wanted to maintain the peace, the herd didn’t want to provoke me, and I was just like ‘sup?’ It made me wonder if it still counted as a standoff when no one actually wanted to hurt each other.

As seconds ticked away, Luna, beside me, sharply nudged me with a foreleg. “Say something,” she hissed out the side of her mouth.

“Like what?” I whispered back. What could I possibly say to make this crowd hold their horses?

“Anything! The silence is intimidating on its own,” she explained.

No one liked to be put on the spot like that, but I could see where Luna was coming from. The ponies, glued together by herd instinct and deer-in-the-headlights suspense, looked like anything would set them off.

Putting on my friendliest smile – a fanged, malicious grin because that was all was capable of offering – I spoke up to the crowd.

"Uh, hi there," Uneasiness visibly rippled through the herd when I broke the silence. It was the exact emotional antithesis of doing the wave. "Greetings, my fellow… ungulates. Feel free to return to your homes. Nothing to see here, folks: I am a perfectly average horse-monster."

Technically, that was correct from both of our perspectives.

No dice, though. They were still all quivery so I continued. "Maybe what we have here is a failure to communicate. I promise you I wouldn't hurt a fly, and that you don't believe me after our introduction yesterday shows a disturbing lack of faith. I said I'm not gonna hurt ya, but if you're really still scarred of me just walk away. You're safe to go, everybody. Just walk away."

Not a one of them left. I guessed that the herbivorous part of their instincts told them that the first one to leave the herd was the first one to get chased.

"Please?" I continued. "Come on, guys, I really don't want to spark another incident. Can y'all just stop quivering and get out of here?" This time, however, I actually received an answer.

Ponk!

A very familiar, air-filled, rubber ball harmlessly bounced off my armor. It squeakily bounced a few times before settling at the hooves of a little, light blue filly.

"What was that for? Hey, kid, can't you see I'm in the middle of something?" Wait up, that was the same kid from when I first got here!

And she just ruined my attempts to defuse the crowd. The herd now bore faces of horrified suspense, like they expected me to stomp the little girl into Play-Doh. "Oh, for God's sake. I get it. Jeez."

Alright, fine. If they wouldn't treat me as anything but a villain, then I'd have to disperse them in a way that fit in with the narrative they all wrote for me. Thinking about what a villain would do, I shrugged my shoulders, reared up on my hind legs, and went with the flow.

"Curses," I wailed dramatically. Selling it as hard as possible, I collapsed onto my back and shook a hoof to the heavens. "Blast it, little girl! Woe and defeat, I am foiled! Blaaaaargh. I am, like, definitely beaten and stuff."

The assembled ponies glanced back to one another, not believing a single word of this. "What is he doing? All she did was toss a ball at him."

"My only weakness!"

Luna's mouth slowly hung open during the seconds she needed to process this scene. "Are you… are you playing dead? That's your plan?"

Hail to the King

"Sorry, Luna, I can't talk because I've been beaten." My voice was loud enough for everyone to hear. "In fact, I'm so thoroughly defeated that if I were a bystander watching this, I'd seize the opportunity to make my getaway." I sat up to look at the crowd. "*Not that I'm suggesting anything!* Just throwing out ideas!"

Luna facepalmed. "This has to be the worst idea I've ever heard, and I once tried to make friends on a night dedicated to fearing me." She could hate all she wanted, but the crowd actually started scattering.

Meanwhile, the filly's eyes went wide and sparkly with astonishment. Apparently one person bought into my terrible act. "I did it," she whispered. A huge smile spread across her face and she excitedly stamped her hooves upon becoming the greatest hero of this era, behind Spike of course. "I really did it! Look, everypony, I got him!"

"She got me!"

The princess sighed, mostly in annoyance, but, deep down, with a bit of relief. Luna dispelled her horn and rolled her eyes. "Sombra, get up."

"Can't. I've been got." I pointed to the filly, who by this point planted one hoof on my ribcage to pose like a big game hunter. "Besides, we got one other guy who's not leaving."

Luna turned around to see that a single other pony had yet to disperse with the rest of the crowd. He and the girl currently gloating over my defeat seemed to share the same color scheme; whitish coat, blue hair, and purple eyes. Unlike the filly, however, he was just as jumpy as the crowd that left. His eyes were wide and he remained absolutely still, as if standing on paper-thin ice.

"Glass Slipper, get away from him," he stammered through his closed jaw. He minimized his noise and movements on the off chance I worked under the T-rex rules of engagement.

The kid remained oblivious to his concerns. "Why are you whispering, dad?"

"Get off him and run. You have no idea what he's capable of."

"But dad, I got him. He went 'blaargh' and everything. That means I win." The filly then sneered at me and cocked back the foreleg clutching her rubber ball. "So fork over that crown, buster, before I give you another taste."

The stallion rushed forward, nervously fear-chuckling as he snatched the filly up. "D-don't mind her. Kids these days, always joking around." He set her behind him protectively. "Wow, would you look at the time! We have to be in another country in the next minute or two. Gotta go!"

The girl dragged her hooves on the ground as he shuffled her away. "But daddy," she whined. "I wanted to see what his cutie mark means."

"Beauty mark?" I felt my face for moles.

To the stallion's heart attack, the filly wiggled loose and walked back over to me. "No, I said cutie mark." She pointedly brought attention to the picture on my rear. "This! It tells you what you're supposed to be good at. What does yours mean? Teacher says you gobble up foals who don't eat their vegetables, but yours doesn't look anything like that."

I snickered. "Is that what these things are called?" Cutie mark. Man, I was going to have the hardest time using that term with a straight face. "I've noticed everyone else had a picture on their rears, but I don't know what they're for." I looked at the rest of our group. We had my whatever-it-was, a moon, a bow and arrow, and one definitively unadorned flank. "Except you. How come you don't have one?"

The girl moped over my ignorant observation, and the stallion, for obvious paternal reasons, totally abandoned his fearful demeanor and confronted me. "Hey! She'll discover her special talent whenever she's ready. There are foals much older than her who still haven't discovered theirs! Nopony gets to talk to my daughter that way, especially not you." Once he finished his parental outburst, however, he double-taked. "Wait, what do you mean, you don't know what they're for? How do you not know?"

I shrugged. "Until just now, I thought you dyed your fur for decorative purposes. Figured it was a cultural thing."

The crystal pony raised a single eyebrow. "You earn it when you discover what makes you, you. It's easily one of the most important moments of your life. We're even planning a huge surprise party once Slipper gets h- I mean, ponies usually celebrate when a foal earns theirs. It doesn't just *happen* without you noticing it."

"Huh. That's... interesting." I craned my neck to look at my mark again. "So what does it say about me? Has that been there this whole time?" The ponies weren't sure how to address that one. The filly was especially dumbstruck, almost as if I insulted her personally by being so blasé about something so socially significant. "No, no, I'd remember if it was," I murmured to myself. "Weird. It's... Well, honestly, I have no idea how I got it."

My statements only reinforced the stallion's bafflement. He even mouthed 'how?' to Luna, who just shrugged. "King Sombra, there's something off about you."

"Yeah, I've been getting that a lot. It's kind of the whole point of all this. Didn't you hear my explanation yesterday with the interdimensional ghost-puppetry?" I asked. The stallion shifted a bit and stopped making eye contact. "You got this look on your face like you don't believe me. Why're you still all suspicious? Come on, what did you think happened?"

That question was rhetorical, but Luna, ever the goose to my jet engine, decided to voice her opinion on the matter. “We, for one, believe severe trauma reset thy whole personality. T’is the simplest explanation.”

The stallion beside her scratched his head in thought and also chipped in his opinions. “Off the top of my head, I’m guessing a reformation spell gave up and started from scratch.”

“Sombra’s evil twin, but since he’s already evil, it cancels out,” the filly insisted.

The three of them waited for a response, genuinely expecting me to tell them which of their guesses was correct. My head drooped. “Is there a single one of you ponies who can take what I say at face value? Am I really that hard to believe?”

“Not at all,” said the stallion, humoring me. “Ghosts are real, so are aliens, and you’re somehow both of them. Makes total sense.”

I rolled my eyes at the jibe, “Hey, there’s no need to be sarcas-” but then just as quickly I perked up. “Dude, you’re being sarcastic!” I exclaimed, to which the stallion shrunk back thinking he’d provoked my ire. “No, that’s a good thing! It’s a step up! No knee-jerk homicide or shrieking panic attacks. You’re the most reasonable guy I’ve met so far. Put ‘er there, buddy.” I offered him my hoof. “I don’t think I ever got your name.”

The stallion hesitantly took my hoof. “Er… thanks,” he said to his worst nightmare. “I’m Crystal Arrow. You’re, uh, not exactly how I pictured.”

“Good. That’s exactly the reaction I was hoping for today.” The stallion took back his hoof and scraped it on the floor like it had germs or something. “And speaking of today’s goals, were you or one of your neighbors affected by yesterday’s… events?” I said after searching for an inoffensive word.

No matter how delicately I phrased it, my words undeniably struck a nerve. “Yes,” he responded flatly. “Our house was smack dab in the epicenter. They say it needs to be demolished.”

“Perfect!” I exclaimed. Immediately, though, I backpedaled. “Or, no, not for you. It’s definitely not a good thing. But we can make it a good thing! Er, not the destruction part, though. The next part. Fixing it. Let me start over.” I stopped to sort my thoughts like I should’ve done before puking them out like that. “I’m trying to fix the stuff I ruined. If your house got hit, do you want us to patch it up?”

“I… I don’t think that’s a good idea.” The stallion shied away from me, looking at Luna for support. “This is an awful lot to take in at once. Princess Luna, do you believe this?”

“Indeed, We do.” She affirmed “After all, we are here to ensure it.”

He wavered indecisively, so I poked my muzzle into the conversation. “Please?” I asked. “It won’t be any trouble, and I *really* need something to go right today.”

Slightly unnerved by the fanged smile, the stallion, against his better judgment and entirely at the recommendation of Princess Luna, agreed. “S-sure,” he said, though it was definitively lacking excitement. “The place is already going to come down, so it’s not like I have anything to lose.”

“Awesome. You’re definitely not going to regret this.”

On the walk over we learned that his and the little filly’s house was struck by one of the largest pieces during the incident. Since then, they’d been staying with a neighbor. They led us to one of the more crumbly parts of town – again, entirely my fault – where we stopped in front of a severely damaged home on the same street where I first arrived in the Crystal Empire.

“They say it has to come down soon. I’m not sure what you hope to do with it, but you can go ahead and try,” our escort said as he stepped up to the front entrance. “Well, here we are.”

“Neat. It must’ve been really nice place before-” I immediately regretted opening my mouth. Where in the heck did all this impulsiveness come from? “When, uh, you know, when I did that thing yesterday.”

“Yes,” he grumbled, “it was.”

Luna stepped between us before I could cram my foot even farther into my mouth. “Forgive the impertinence. We are sure he meant no offense.”

“It’s okay. Honestly I’m more concerned about her.” He pointed at his daughter, who had been riding my back the entire walk over, as was her right as conqueror. “Slipper, could you go play at your friend’s house? I don’t think it’s safe to be here.”

“But I don’t want to miss anything,” she protested.

I agreed with Arrow, so to help speed things along I helped her to the ground. “Sorry, kiddo, here’s where you get off.” She seemed pretty upset about it. “Oh, don’t give me that look. You get to tell your friends how you single-handedly saved the Empire. Don’t you want them to know that you stopped me with nothing but a rubber ball?”

She gasped. “That’s right! They’re gonna be so jealous!” Her ears dropped down, however, when she weighed her options. “But I can’t just leave.” She raised one hoof to the side of her mouth to whisper conspiratorially to Arrow. “And what if I have to stop him again?”

Her dad tousled her mane. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” he tilted his head meaningfully to Luna. Slipper got the picture. “I’ll be sure to tell you all about it later. No pouting, Slipper, I’ll be fine. Now run along.”

She gave him a quick hug goodbye (while sneakily handing him the ball in case of emergency) and dashed off to boast to all her friends about her acts of amazing heroism.

Now that the kid was gone, I could take a closer look at the house and see that it was in terrible shape. Large cracks zig-zagged across the surface. Patchy, obviously rushed repairs were evident, but ultimately unsuccessful because a large sign on the front read 'Condemned.' A pile of their belongings rested to the side and some furniture was already safely outdoors. The place was completely ruined.

"Shoot, man. I did this," only Luna heard me whisper. This, right here, was when things got real for me. I wanted to prove myself, so the universe made sure to give me a trial by fire. This place might be the single most damaged structure in the whole city. "Welp," I swallowed a lump in my throat before it could ruin my confidence, "It ain't going to fix itself. Lead the way, Arrow."

The stallion ripped off the condemned sign and entered. Merely stepping onto the tile caused the walls to rumble like he activated some kind of ancient trap mechanism. As we continued, the stone shifted and groaned with each step, reminding us all of the threat of imminent collapse. "We should start upstairs. It's a lot worse up there than down here."

We went one at a time because we weren't sure if the staircase could hold our weight. First, the stallion tiptoed up the stairs as lightly as possible. Next, Luna followed and spread her wings in case the steps dropped out from underneath her. Finally, I made my way upstairs, but a strange feeling came over me and I stopped right in the middle.

Luna noticed that I hadn't joined them. "Sombra, why do you not follow?"

"Hold on a sec." I trotted back down the stairs only turn around and climb them again. Then, to the other ponies' bafflement, I repeated the motion: back down, back up. My smile grew with every step up. "Dude," I grinned. "This feels *awesome.*"

Luna had no idea what to make of my latest idiosyncrasy. "Sombra, what conceivable purpose doth that serve?"

"I don't know, but I love every moment of it." I turned around for another go.

The simple act of ascending made my chest swell with excitement. It made me think of why thrones, penthouses, and pedestals are all elevated, and how terms like 'high ground,' 'upper hand,' and 'held to a higher standard' used height to connotatively mean better.

More steps, more stairs. I wanted to be higher. I wanted to ascend beyond everything else. To be the highest. I wanted more up. Up was good. Stairs brought you up. Stairs were good. Staaaaaaaiiiiirrrrrssss.

"Sombra!" Luna called, causing me to snap out of my peculiar trance. "What is wrong with thee?" Apparently, I'd turned around yet again to repeat the process.

For a second there I felt like a sleepwalker who had woken up in an unfamiliar place. “I… um… I’m not sure. Something came over me just now,” I mumbled, my brow furrowing. That was odd to say the least. Just what in the world caused that? “Uh… hey Luna, do you ponies, like, get that instinct some animals do where they feel more important just by being higher up? You know, like parrots?”

The princess blinked two or three times and shook her head dismissively. No response could dignify that question. She then beckoned me up to the second floor, so I trotted up the last amazing steps. Silently, I hoped this house had a third story.

Up on the second floor, a jack, the kind used to change spare tires, was the only thing keeping the roof from collapsing. It bowed from the tremendous weight pressing down upon it. Daylight was visible through some of the cracks, and noticeable chunks and pebbles of crystal littered the floor.

I may have bitten off more than I could chew.

Luna and Crystal Arrow went to the wall and sat on their haunches, watching me expectantly like a pair of spectators. “Beginst now. We’ll be watching,” said the princess.

“…About that.” My eyes passed from the rubble, to the cracks, back to the ponies. “The thing is, when Shining Armor and I did this, I just held the rocks in place while he fixed it. I kinda figured you’d do the same thing.”

Luna’s disposition sprung a leak and spilled out whatever enthusiasm she’d built up so far. “Thou didst come all this way, after all this effort, and thou dost not know the spell?” Luna demanded, to which I scratched the back of my head sheepishly. “Thou art a living, breathing fiasco, knowest thou that? Stand aside.”

Princess Luna made a big show of levitating two rocks in front of her. “Watch and do as We do.”

The effect was instant. A bright, blue burst emanated from her horn and suddenly the stones were merged. It was like they were suddenly glued together and I could see a line where the fusion was made. Luna encouraged me to do the same, but I looked at her work dubiously.

“That’s… not gonna happen. Shining talked about this earlier. I don’t know how to use magic without going all ‘hrrarrgle,’” I waved my hands – hooves, sigh – to mime the gurgling motion of my horn.

Luna sighed at the latest setback. “Fine. We shall try this in a way that thou mayest understand.”

She took position again and tried recalling some half-forgotten memories from long ago.

“If We remember correctly, dark magic is baser and less refined than Ours, more instinctual but with considerable downsides.” She eyed my horn questioningly. “Darkness be potent, however, and to use thine abilities, to be frank, may be a simple matter of filling your target with magic and forcing thy will upon it.”

Luna's horn glowed and she held up a second set of stones. But this time the color of her magic was the same sickly, bubbling purple that mine was. She grunted, grit her teeth, and shut her eyes, obviously in considerable pain. "Watch Us – Ouch! – and pay close attention – Eurgh! – for We shall only do this once."

The stones became murky with a darkened aura identical to mine. Their edges roiled with the darkness until their edges seemingly passed through each other like overlaid images on a projector. The end result appeared more complete than Luna's earlier attempt. No seam was visible.

Exhausted, she dropped to her rump panting deeply. "Skies above, that stung so much!" she yelled. Luna bit her lip and hissed in pain, grasping her horn between her hooves protectively. "Ow! Ow! Owwww! How dost thou do that so casually?"

I opened my mouth a couple times without any words coming out.

Crystal Arrow, however, rushed over to the princess. "Your majesty, are you alright."

"Yea, We are well. Just grant us pause to recuperate." She rubbed away the burning sensation with a hoof. Then, audaciously pretending she didn't squander her dignity in the last few seconds, Luna stood up with a stern and serious expression. "So there. Cast thy spells in the manner We just demonstrated."

"I don't think..."

"Just try," She insisted. The princess kicked a shard of stone so it slid across the floor to me. "Here. Take this piece and fuse it back in place with the ceiling."

"Alright," I replied uncertainly. The piece levitated into place easy enough, but I was still nervous. "I'll, uh, give it a shot, I guess."

Having no knowledge of how much power I needed to put into the crystals, I kept my gaze on Luna and kept pumping the energy in until her expression changed. I was the magical Clever Hans. My tongue poked out and glided to the side as my focus deepened. I imagined the boundaries of the edges disappearing, like two droplets of water coming into contact with each other.

Luna grinned ever so slightly, so I stopped and chanced a glance at the crystals to see what, if anything, I accomplished. The shard successfully merged with the ceiling. It worked. Holy crap, it actually worked!?

"Yeah!" I pumped a hoof victoriously. That was one of the few spells I casted without horrible consequences. "See that? We did it! Luna, you and me, we're problem solvers."

I was quite the greenhorn, despite what my forehead might tell you, so finally getting things right for once was a huge deal.

"Adequate," Luna granted. Already she began her share of the repairs. "Thou couldst have made the surface smoother, but t'is a start. Shall we continue?"

"Heck yeah, we'll continue."

The two of us started putting the place back together one shattered piece at a time. Luna helpfully provided instruction. "Keepest the pieces as still as possible. Use as much power as is necessary, but not to excess."

I kept up emulously with Luna, but to my frustration she stayed ahead with such casual grace that it was obvious she was holding back. With so many people going on about how I was some mighty sorcerer with all-powerful black magic, I wanted to believe my own hype, but so far I just wasn't living up to it. As the minutes passed, I gradually fell behind.

Princess Luna put up with my amateurish attempts at first, but that amount of patience occurs only once in a blue moon-goddess, so she grew noticeably impatient. "Cease thy tarrying, Sombra. T'is not some tortuous, complicated invocation. Take two pieces, make one piece. Emanate thy spell with vis, vim, and vigor!"

She ordered and I followed. "Alright. Sheesh. I'm hurrying." With as much vis as I could muster, and all the vim at my disposal, I vigorously energized my horn.

"But remember, not to excess!" she continued as the stone started vibrating. She backed up to the wall when the rock dimmed, rather forebodingly, the same dark shade as my conjurations. "Sombra, don't overload the sp-"

And the rock went Boom! I'd been the cause of so many explosions lately that I could now rank them by intensity. This was a three.

When the crystal detonated it sent little, fragmented spears in all directions. By sheer luck none of the shotgunning projectiles actually hit me or the princess. Luna did, however, end up with an outline of crystal spikes missing her by scant inches. She looked like the assistant in a knife-throwing act. Several of the blade-like shards skewered the wall straight through her mane and tail, pinning the princess by her hair.

A thoroughly deadpan Princess Luna took note of her predicament and huffed. "And what have we learned?"

"Don't overload the spell."

She nodded with what little slack her mane gave her. "And hast thou learned why one must always listen to his princess?"

"... Is it because there's a rigid feudal system in place?"

"Try again."

"Your magic powers confirm the force theory of government?"

"No. It is because We are considerably older and wiser than thyself, and when we tell thee something, it would behoove thee to listen," she corrected. "Now get Us out of here, and pray that Our mane is not ruined."

As requested, I tried to get her loose. Unfortunately, my wizardry ranked somewhere between pitiful and pathetic, so I couldn't pluck out the shards. I'd just clamped my teeth around a crystal when Luna pushed me away.

"Oh, for harmony's sake just let me do it." Her blue aura wrapped around the crystals keeping her pinned. "All it takes – Urgh! – is a little bit – Nng! – of acuity and – Mph! – effort. 'Tis – Rgh! – simple! "

When that didn't work Luna's magic blinked out and she gave her trapped mane an experimental tug.

"Hmm." Her magic returned brighter than ever and pulled at the stakes with phenomenal cosmic power. "HRRRRRNGH!" After another failure, she switched tactics and began using short, rapid-fire bursts of magic to dislodge them. She even tugged back and forth with her neck, as if headbanging would jar them loose. "Nng! Nng! Nnnng! **OWW!**" Her eyes misted from pulling too hard. Finally, she let her horn flicker out and admitted defeat. "Actually, that's quite stuck, isn't it?"

"Well, well, well. *Now* look who can't live up to her own 'boisterous resolve,'" I mocked with her own words. "Not so easy, is it?"

Luna scowled, but it was more competitive than angry. "Hush thy mouth, neophyte. We are just getting started." She returned to her labors with renewed fervor. "Mayhaps We should focus on one at a time."

While Luna did her thing, Arrow came up to me with concern etched on his face. "Do you think we should find a guard, or Shining Armor or somepony?"

"Let's give her a few minutes first. I think she's trying to make a point."

The princess, meanwhile, kept struggling with the surprisingly tenacious crystal. "Hnk! We are the night, and We shall not be bested! Rgh! Honor demandeth thine undoing!" Putting a truly unnecessary amount of effort into her latest attempts, Luna finally ripped the first crystal out. The sharp shard flew like a throwing knife.

"Woah!" Arrow, quick as his namesake, dove to the ground to avoid it. The crystal hit the far side of the room and shattered.

"Hurrah!" Luna cheered. "T'is as We said. Acuity and effort win the day!" Unconcerned with how fast she pitched that thing, Luna concentrated on another crystal and pulled with all her might.

Crystal Arrow wisely backed away a few feet. "Does anypony else get the feeling that something bad is about to happen?"

"Like what?" I asked. "The princess seems to have things under control. Just look at 'er go."

Luna just about got the second one loose. "As if such a tiny thing could challenge a princess of Equestria!" she victoriously crowed. Her magic grasped the chunk of crystal, wiggled and twisted it around, then fired it out of the wall.

Now here was the part when everything went belly-up.

The shard zoomed straight ahead, audibly slicing the air in its path, and hit the jack that Arrow set up. It connected with a loud, metallic *CLANG!* and smacked the jack across the room.

"Like that!" Arrow shrieked. Oh my god, Luna just knocked down the only support beam to the roof!

Crrrck! Taking its cue, the ceiling growled at us. We all knew what was about to happen. On instinct I grabbed Arrow and leaped out of the way, leaving a trail of smoke behind us. We tumbled into a safe part of the room just in time to see Luna get hammered like a railroad spike.

THOOM!

With mute horror we watched as half the crystalline roof dropped onto Luna's shimmering blue head. A meteorite impact without the fire would look something like the clubbing Luna just suffered. The suddenness and severity of the accident shocked us into bystander mode, so the two of us just kinda watched for a minute in equal parts captivation and denial.

When the dust settled, and I saw a tuft of Luna's mane sticking out of the rubble, I screamed. "We killed Princess Luna!"

"We?!" shouted Arrow as he scrambled to his hooves.

"It's your house that crushed her," I brazenly shunned away from liability. "This building is a giant, ancient rock. There's no way it's up to code! This was an accident waiting to happen."

"You're the one who got her stuck in the first place!" he yelled. "And what happened to all that big talk yesterday, Mr. I'm-Totally-A-Good-Guy? Just going to drop all that at the first sign of trouble?"

"But- This is- I just," Ouch. Right in the hypocrisy. "I... Gah! Why'd you have to call me out on that?! Okay. Okay, you're right." We could still fix this. I just needed to calm down. "We need to think this through. Every problem has a solution. We need to get help. Maybe we can find the guards? We, uh..." I paced back and forth trying to think of something, anything, that can salvage this disaster.

But then I took one look at Luna and it all fell apart.

"We gotta hide the body!" Panic didn't make for a sound state of mind. "Aw, man, this is a crime. I'm going back to the dungeon!" I grabbed my head to keep it from exploding. "Shining's going to go berserk when he sees this! I gotta get away! What's the pony version of Mexico?!"

Arrow smacked me right in the face. "Get ahold of yourself!" Getting slapped by a hoof ain't fun, that's for sure. The stallion then shook me to bring me back to my senses, but I wouldn't stop blubbering.

"They'll send me to the glue factory!" An observant viewer might have noticed the green tint to my eyes. "I attacked Shining Armor once, but it just bounced off! They're rubber and I'm glue!"

Arrow kept throttling and I kept rambling, neither of us accomplishing much. But then something miraculous happened.

"Mmmng…" a voice sounded from the rubble.

The two of us stopped abruptly and Crystal Arrow gasped in relief. "She's alive! I can't believe it, Luna's okay!"

"Uuuuuuuuuhhh…" she zombied.

I too gasped. "Kill it!"

That outburst earned me another hoof-slap. Okay, so Luna was still unconscious. She wasn't dead, and that gave me time to sort out how, exactly, I could explain what happened to her. That was assuming, of course, that she would be in any mood to listen once she woke up.

Was it wrong to hope for amnesia?

Arrow began digging through the rubble so I joined him. We managed to free her down to waist depth, but she still had those crystal spikes pinning her in place. "She's still nailed to the wall," Arrow said while ineffectually tugging at her mane.

"How? She had a house dropped on her. That had to have jarred something loose."

Crck! The rest of the ceiling cricked ominously.

Arrow and I gulped in unison. Yes, it did jar something loose. The other half of the roof stood poised ready to fall, because the frigid, unforgiving universe wanted to screw the three of us in particular. Luckily, Arrow was pretty quick on the uptake. The guy grabbed the downed jack off the ground and jammed it under the ceiling to prevent a second collapse. It was an extremely temporary solution, but it worked. For now.

"There's no way that thing's going to hold."

KRRK! A fissure snaked its way down a wall and the metal jack bent slightly.

"Nope! Definitely not gonna hold!" I magically repaired the rapidly breaking crystals as fast as I could, but it still wasn't enough to slow the cracks.

"Go faster!" Arrow pleaded.

"If I do this any harder, it'll cause another explosion." **Tkk!** *Krrrrkk*. Another crack in the ceiling spread to the wall, breaking a lightning bolt-shaped rift into the structure. No. There really wasn't any way out of this. "Arrow, you need to get out of here."

"What? No! This is my house. There has to be something we can do to save it."

"Look, man, this place is gonna collapse any minute now. Luna's tougher than she looks and I'm basically unkillable. We'll be okay, but you need to get somewhere safe." **CrrKKKK!** The entire room jolted and the ceiling fell down about a foot. "Please. I've messed up so much already. I don't want you hurt too."

"I... B-but I..." He wanted to protest, but the loudest **CRACK!** of all sounded and a whole exterior wall fell to the ground outside like a gigantic domino. "It's really going to fall, isn't it?" His ears lowered, his eyes softened, and it may have been my imagination, but I swore I saw his colors dull. "It's actually happening. What'll I tell Slipper?" With painful reluctance he started to exit the room.

"Arrow," I called just before he left. "I'm sorry. I tried my best, but..."

I had no idea how to finish that sentence.

"Don't." He cut me off. It was impossible to tell if he was sad or angry. "Sombra, you... By Celestia, Sombra, you need to get your act together. Look, I get that you're nothing like the old king. He would never have tried to fix his mistakes, let alone apologize. I know you tried your best, but I won't thank you. Not for this, especially when you were the one who caused it in the first place," he sighed. "I'm sure it wasn't intentional, but just because it was an accident doesn't mean it isn't your fault. I lost my home because of you."

Of all the accusations I'd faced, humiliations I'd suffered, and pain I'd endured over the past couple days, that, right there, cut the deepest. Once he had said his piece, he left the building. I didn't have the guts to respond.

Watching from the window as Arrow went to go find a guard, I winced as he spared a final glance at the house and shook his head sadly.

"I am the worst person I know," I whispered to myself.

If we have only our words and actions by which we are judged by others, then what did my actions say about me? The picture wasn't flattering.

Hail to the King

"No. I can't let it end like this. I can't keep screwing up anymore. Crystal Arrow, I *swear* I'm not going to let this happen!"

I should have known better. Rather than delivering a message straight to Shining Armor, Crystal Arrow ran to the first guard he found and told him everything. What else could I expect from a scared civilian? But the real problem emerged when that guard followed procedure and reported to his superior, who in turn did the same, and so on.

Thus, an emergency military communication turned into a game of telephone.

"Captain, sir!" one of the guards rushed to deliver his news to the prince. "It's Sombra! He's keeping the princess prisoner in one of the ruined houses!"

"What?!" Shining Armor and Cadence, who had joined the manhunt, cried. The captain rushed up to his subordinate. "Tell me everything. Now!"

"That's pretty much it, sir. And also, uh, something about how he nailed Princess Luna and now she's passed out. I'm not sure what to make of that. The meaning got lost around four ponies ago."

Cadence gasped. "He hurt the princess!"

Aghast and appalled, Shining Armor decided that if that were true then he was going to stab me until I ran out of blood. "Which house?! And how could he have overpowered an alicorn?" A thousand scenarios passed through his mind about the epic battle that must've taken place to best the former Nightmare Moon.

"We don't know, sir. And as to which house it's," the stallion paused in deep thought. "He either said 'fifteenth to the left' or 'fifty to the west.' It was hard to tell."

The captain stomped the ground in frustration. These troops needed so much more training if they were ever going to be an effective peacekeeping force. "This whole operation is a disaster! Forget it, we'll backtrack. You, take me to whoever gave you that information. Cadence, you and I are going with this guard to trace back the path the messengers took. Everypony else, cancel the citywide search and concentrate forces in that general direction," he issued orders to the remaining troops, pointing in the path the runner came from. "Listen closely for the signal and rush to the sound the second you hear it, now get moving!"

"Okay. I can do this. It's controllable," I talked myself into pretending that I knew what I was doing. "Right. I'm the wizard here. I'm the big, important horsey-mage, so my horn has to listen to what I say. I can do this. Just like Luna said: vigor." My horn ignited mightily, and in response the rock turned nearly black and began vibrating in preparation to explode. "Nope! Luna's wrong!" I shut the spell off right away.

The weight of the partially-collapsed roof combined with the already weakened stone meant every crack in these load-bearing walls brought the house closer to ruin.

"Oh, man. What am I going to do here?" My entire repertoire consisted of making rocks and turning into smoke. Also blowing stuff up, but that's what got me into this mess. Of the three, only one was remotely useful.

"How sturdy are those rocks I make?" I wondered. "Are they stronger than that jack that got knocked down?" It wasn't like I had any other options, so I concentrated a spell on the area beneath the roof. "Don't break the floor. Please don't break anything else." A dark crystal sprouted from the ground. "Good. Slowly, gently." It kept growing up and up. "Aaaaaaaannnd… there!"

Having grown to connect the floor and roof, the crystal functioned as a makeshift support beam. The ceiling no longer rumbled and the cracks stopped expanding. "Yes!" I jumped in the air. "Woohoo! I did something right for once! And holy crap it's depressing how happy I am about that."

Just to be safe, a few more spires were added to keep it steady. "There. That's done. Now to get the princess free." The ceiling audibly shifted one more time, assumedly just to be vindictive, so I conjured another few reinforcements. "I said, that's *done*," I repeated threateningly to the inanimate house. It obediently remained stable so I focused my attention on Luna. "Good. Now, Luna, how'm I going to get you loose?"

I didn't trust my magic, but it seemed like my only option, or at least the only realistic option.

"How angry would she be if I cut her hair off?" I wondered. However, recalling her threat about summoning a meteor – and that an asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs – doing so might make me responsible for a new geologic epoch. We'll call that plan B.

Since hooves were worthless, stubby nubs that should have barred this species from developing a tool-using society, I couldn't get a solid grip on the crystals. Thus it was back to the magic.

"Sorry, Luna, but I don't have the fine control to pluck 'em out like you did. Let's hope this doesn't hurt too badly." Since the last thing I needed was to have her wake up to me yanking her mane I levitated the half-buried princess's head to give her some slack. Then I wrapped an aura around every spike keeping her in place and heaved so hard my veins started bulging.

Hail to the King

"HNNNK! Wow, that really is stuck. How'd this even happen?" I was already a king; pulling things out of stones should've been a cakewalk. "At least I have plenty of time to get you out of here now that the supports are up," I said, triggering imminent disaster's voice-activated self-destruct sequence.

I had all the time in the world and no distractions to stop me from saving Luna, so of course that was when some of Cadence's finest showed up.

"Stop right there!" a guard shouted. Some sparkly sentries scrambled up the stairs, spears set to subdue somebody. Arrow must have told them where to find us. "King Sombra, stand down immediately and make no sudden moveme-" he started his canned orders, but gasped when he saw the state Luna was in. " *What have you done to the princess!?*"

My magic cut out and Luna flopped to the ground. "This? Oh. Wow. Yeah, this looks really bad." I scooted away from the unconscious body. "There is an explanation here. Do you want the short version?"

"No. What we want is a doctor, and for you to go back to the dungeon for trying to escape from the palace." One of the ponies checked Luna's vitals.

"Escape?" I asked. "What escape? I didn't escape anything. See, we got this rule where I've got relatively free reign as long as one of the royals are with me. Just ask Luna."

That angry, incredulous glare they gave me must've been part of their training because it was exactly how Shining Armor looked at me most of the time. "Ask her how? Her majesty has clearly been knocked unconscious. By you."

"N-no, no. She's fine. She's just, uh..." Luna's crown fell off, so I hung it up on her horn as casually as possible. "Resting."

"I've seen enough. Sombra you're under arrest for, like, pretty much everything we arrest ponies for."

"Wait! Just let me get her out of here first. She can explain everything." I had never been arrested. I respected the law and feared its enforcers. I should've surrendered, but I kept thinking about how difficult it would be to hold on to a bar of soap with these impractical, clumsy hooves. "Think about what you're doing. You aren't seriously going to abandon your princess just to make an arrest, are you? If you give me a chance, I think I can get her out. Maybe."

Being royal guards, they swore their loyalty to crown and country, but, since this was a brand new nation with limited common law, no one told them which of those two took priority. Unwilling to leave a princess injured and alone, they decided letting me continue constituted the lesser of two evils. "Alright. You can try, but the second she's out, you're going to the palace."

"Great! Step back, you two. I got this."

I was now right back to where I started, only this time with an impatient audience. I tried to pull Luna loose with little effect and the guards weren't afraid to voice their concern.

"Pull harder!"

"I'm trying!" I yanked, pulled back and forth, and tried to shake her loose, but the rock kept her wedged too tight. Worried about how many times I pulled Luna's hair, I decided to go with a rip-the-bandaid method of problem solving. With teeth bared and veins bulging, I pumped more power into my horn to take it all out at once. "Rrrr…"

This was a phenomenally terrible plan because I had yet to fully understand the correlation between my state of mind and the strength of the magic. Fear that I had hurt Luna, frustration from being unable to help a single person today, and that feeling of impotence from being unable to control my own powers created a nice, hot cup of resentment that my horn greedily slurped up. And with the guards egging me on, it was only a matter of time before something had to give. And when the rock finally gave, with all that built-up energy, it gave hard.

"…rrrrRRRAAAGH!"

Pretty much the whole pile exploded backwards, and with it, so did Princess Luna.

The princess majestically sailed over our heads, her beautiful mane aflutter, and glided a magnificent arc all the way across the room until she landed in a manner that wasn't quite as graceful as we would have hoped.

CRCK! KTHRAK! THUMP!

A loud crash followed another, and another, and another. Upon seeing what had happened I nearly swallowed my own tongue, because – and I swear to every god that's still worshipped this was an accident – I just threw Luna down a flight of stairs.

THUMP! Whump! **THWACK!** Thump-**THUMP**-Thump! THCK!

My god, that mare could bounce. Her limp, unconscious body slid, rolled, and slammed down the solid stone steps. Her floppy head slapped her face into sharp corners with reckless abandon, gleefully pounding a lively drumbeat the whole way. The guards and I flinched with each thump as if we were the ones being struck. It was a bad day to be Luna's skull.

Clack! THUMP-*Thunk!* Bump! ……**KRACK!**

Once it mercifully ended, all three of us peered down to see the damage with eyes and mouths wide open. Then the two guards faced me with eyebrows furrowing in scarcely contained fury.

"I," my mouth dried to the consistency of sandpaper. "I didn't mean to." Arrow was right about me.

One guard's face turned red while the other's ears made the whistling sound of a teapot boiling over. I opened my mouth, but words wouldn't come out. I choked on dread and remorse as it balled up in my throat.

A couple of things happened. One: The guards charged. So great was their rage that they didn't even bother with their weapons, preferring a primal, atavistic leap with their bare hooves. Two: I dodged out of the way. This in itself seemed like the natural and expected course of action, and panic reinforced that assumption. In fact, it did such a good job of it that I didn't realize I'd thrown myself out of a second story window until I fell halfway to the ground.

"WHY!?" This confirmed it: I'm cursed.

Defenestration really helps a person regain focus and I fired up that spell to turn myself into smoke. Intangibility was the best power for someone as accident prone as me. With full confidence in my escape plan, my horn blazed so I could harmlessly splash into the ground as an incorporeal shade. Once that was done, I needed t-

SPLAT!

Or I could land flat on my face. The extent of my magical incompetence could never be overstated. It took me so long to prepare that spell that I swan dived into the pavement long before it took effect. The force was so powerful that I think my whole head went perfectly flat at the moment of impact.

"Owwwwwww," I whined. Getting punched in the face by the Earth hurt exactly as much as it sounded. Knowing that nothing I could say would patch things over here, I brushed myself off, cracked my snout back into place, and dashed off as fast as my legs could carry me.

Back at the house a guard poked his head out of the window to see me escaping. "He's getting away!" he shouted. "Sound the emergency flugelhorn!"

The blare of a distant and inappropriately festive trumpet froze Shining Armor's blood in his veins. Gone was any hope of finding Luna peacefully. This was it. This just got real. That was the signal.

Cadence, still somewhat jumpy from imagining the implications of my escape, wondered why her husband stopped in place and went all stiff. "Honey, what was that?"

"That," he gulped, "was the emergency signal." The captain spoke in condemned whispers.

Cadence swiveled her ears around to triangulate the noise. "It sounded like a horn from the Crystal Fair."

"When we're using it, it's the emergency signal," he asserted. "It means we found him, and something's gone terribly wrong." They didn't have time to come up with a full, coherent code, so, to paraphrase; a short sound meant 'please send assistance, I have found King Sombra' and a long, loud, continuous blast said 'Everything's fubar! We're all gonna die!'

Cadence's ears stopped moving as her eyes widened to the size of saucers. Those ears dropped to the back of her neck and she felt her blood run cold. "Wrong?" she asked. Shiny could hear the dread sinking into her voice. " *Terribly* wrong?"

Regretfully, Shiny nodded.

Cadence's wings involuntarily sprang out on either side. "No!" she cried. "No more wrong! We're done with wrong!" She latched on to her husband's armor and wrenched him close. "Everything's already gone wrong, Shiny! We can't handle any more wrong!"

Shining's placations were overridden when the horn blew once again in the distance.

This time, Cadence locked on to its source. "That way!" Still clinging to her husband, the mare vaulted into the air and blasted into the sky with a mighty beat of her wings. Shining Armor's surprised yelp sounded suspiciously like a terrified shriek, but for the sake of his pride we'll blame the Doppler Effect.

"It came from that house!" Cadence flew even faster. She zeroed in on an extensively damaged home near the site of the original confrontation yesterday.

With her husband still in tow, they dove through a convenient hole in the roof. "Soldiers, we've arrived!" She landed with a crash and her husband bounced and rolled to a stop. Luckily, some prudently placed pillars stopped anything from shaking loose. "Where is the wrongness?" She asked. "I mean, what's wrong? I mean, what happened? Tell me what happened without using the word 'wrong.'"

Being as concise as possible, a guard first pointed to the fallen slab of former roof. "This," he referred to the rubble. "Did that." His hoof pointed down the stairs. "Sombra dropped it on her."

Shining Armor, woozy from experiencing the same level of g-forces as a golf ball, tottered unsteadily back to his hooves. "Give me a warning next time you do that." He cricked his neck back and forth to make he didn't get whiplash. The mare, however, zipped right past him.

"Where is he? Where did he go?!" she asked aloud. Cadence reached the top of the stairs where the guard pointed. When she looked down and saw an uncomfortably contortioned alicorn lying at the bottom she gasped so hard all four hooves left the ground. "Omigosh, Luna! What did he do to you?!" She leaped down the whole stairway to check on her aunt.

Shining Armor had a more subdued, but no less horrified reaction. "He knocked her unconscious! Quick, see if she's okay!"

Way ahead of him, Cadence tried to arouse the princess, which consisted of sitting on top of the night-pony and rapidly shaking her head to wake her. “Luna! Speak to me Luna!”

“Not like that! You’re crushing her. I don’t think she can breathe.”

Yet another gasp escaped the mare. “She’s not breathing?!” Cadence squawked. To save the life of her fellow alicorn, she raised both forehooves high into the air and *slammed* them down on the night princess’s chest. “**BREATHE!** Wake up, Luna! I’ll save you! Do you see a light at the end of the tunnel? Stay away from the light, auntie! No matter what happens, stay away from the light!”

Cadence inhaled a deep breath, ready to blow it all down Luna’s trachea when Shining pulled her off of the blue diarch. “Cadence, don’t! You’re just going to make it worse!”

The princess squirmed his magical grip. “What else am I supposed to do, Shiny? Everything’s falling apart!”

Shining Armor struggled to keep his flailing wife in his grasp. “I understand you’re a little stressed out, but you need to handle this better. This whole day you’ve been fraying at the edges. Do you need to go back to the palace? Honey, you’ve got to pull yourself together.”

The squirming instantly stopped. Cadence casually dispelled her husband’s magic and walked right up to him, eyes brimming with indignation. “Pull myself together?” she asked as if she had taken those words as a personal insult. “You think I’ve been *a little* stressed out? That I need to *handle* it better?” Shining Armor backed away from his wife’s confrontational advance.

“Shining, darling, look at me. We’re both anxious. We’re both upset. And, yes, we’re both somewhat over our heads with the city’s reconstruction. But you didn’t have to address the fallout from Sombra’s reign. I’ve had to rebuild the empire’s legal and economic framework from scratch, I haven’t had a full night of sleep in months, and every day I personally go through more paperwork than most companies!” She jabbed a hoof at her husband’s armored chest every few words. “*All of that* pales in comparison to how difficult it was to assure the crystal ponies that King Sombra wasn’t coming back for revenge!” Cadence’s crown popped off of her head, spun a full three-sixty, and landed right back in its place. “But now Sombra has escaped our custody, AGAIN, caused *yet another* public scene, and he bashed my aunt’s head in with a rock! ***I think it’s okay to feel a little stressed out!***”

Princess Cadence finished her rant, chest heaving, and dared the captain to respond. Shining wisely decided to keep his mouth shut.

If Shining Armor seemed to be dealing with this situation a lot better than his wife, then it should be pointed out that Cadence had tons more responsibilities and a lot more to prove than he did. She bore her burdens admirably, and may have been able to carry them if I hadn’t shown up, but my presence here was the final straw that karate chopped her back in half.

The angry heaving stopped and Cadence's ears, eyes, and wings drooped sadly. "I shouldn't have snapped like that. I'm sorry, you're right. I am taking this a bit hard. It's just... Oh, this is so much worse that we thought. If Luna's here, then where is Sombra?" Cadence used the same breathing technique she taught Twilight to pull herself together. "Okay. We can do this. First, somepony needs to get Luna back to the palace. Shining, I need you to take her." Before the stallion could interject, Cadence shushed him with a raised hoof. "We don't have any other unicorns to transport her and, Shining, between the two of us, I'm more likely to find Sombra." She flared her wings as explanation. "All I have to do is put him in a force field since he hasn't figured out how to break them yet. This is doable. We just have to figure out where he went."

I glided through town as a Sun-blotting smog to an alley far away from prying eyes. Despite blindly charging through the city as a gloomy miasma, I somehow managed to avoid detection. I wanted to run away, but I had nowhere to run to. Everything was ruined in a most spectacular fashion and I felt like finding a dark corner somewhere and crying. A roof was leveled, a princess bludgeoned, a citizen terrified, a family rendered homeless, and an army sortied to hunt me down: truly, philanthropy at its finest.

"Why does this keep happening?" I shouted. After resolidifying I started pacing in frustration, leaving cracks in the crystalline pavement with every stomp. "How is it this freaking hard!? Every time I try to help, I just make everything **worse**!"

The loose trash in the alley shot away from me. The fact that my eyes pulsed green went unnoticed. Every word from my mouth came from deeper in my throat, welling up more venom and loathing. "I didn't ask for this," I growled. "All I wanted to do was make the best of a bad situation, but *they won't let me*."

The first, faint, violet vapors began to pour from my eyes, now jaded in both color and temperament. "Yeah. That's right. If Cadence or Shining just worked with me from the start, none of this would have happened! But instead they caged me like a rabid animal! What else was I expected to do but escape!? This is all their fault! This is their faullllll- what the heck am I saying?"

I cut myself off in mid-sentence. That wasn't me. Or, well, okay it was me, but it wasn't me-me. I shook my head rapidly and even bopped myself with a hoof to dispel those uncharacteristic opinions. "What on earth was that about? I never shift blame onto other people. I'm not that kind of person. Why would I say that?"

Introspection, however, would have to wait. There was a clicking sound not too far away.

"I think I heard something in this alley."

Hail to the King

My ears swiveled automatically to where I heard that voice. Those were footsteps. Or hoof clops, whatever. “Someone’s coming!” I yelped. “Shoot, the guards must be looking for me. I gotta hide!” With nowhere else to go, I leaped into the alley’s dumpster and slammed the lid closed. “Did they see me?”

Holy mother of God that was a mistake!

The dumpster wasn’t empty when I dove into it, so I now stood fetlock-deep in something truly vile. The gunk in here wasn’t the modern-day garbage of unrecycled cans and year-old smartphones. This was a putrid bowl of mushy fermentation. Cadence must have been trying to introduce sanitation laws, but forgot to invent the Hefty bag. Here was all the filth of the Dung Ages, now in one convenient box.

“Urp!” I choked back a gag.

Those voices weren’t too far away. With any luck, they’d see an empty alley and keep walking. But the smell was unbearable. Come on, just a few more seconds. Let the guards pass. It should only take a couple moments. Just a few more...

“PLEUGH!” Unable to tolerate another second, I exploded out of the garbage like a hobo jack-in-the-box. “Oh my god, that smell!” I wheezed for clean air. “It’s like the mangiest dog in the world took a blood dump! Blaugh!”

The instinct to cover my nose became my new physiology’s cruelest prank because I smeared that awful gunk right on my snout. It made me gag so hard I toppled out of the dumpster. “HURK!”

So there I was, gasping for breath, dry heaving, and wondering where I could get a tetanus shot when I looked up to find the shocked, unblinking stare of a pair of Cadence’s guards.

I froze still. They froze still. Nobody moved a muscle. I stared. They stared back. Neither of them said a word for what was easily half a minute. They never walked past the alley. Instead they turned down it to ensure the area was clear. “Yup,” I whispered to myself. “Cursed.”

“Found him.” One of them pointed at me.

Actually, you know what? No more of this could be attributed to bad luck. I simply made terrible decisions with awful consequences. It was my own fault that I stood here, smelling like someone burned down a tannery, and mere seconds away from getting dragged back to the dungeon.

I knew that logically, but my emotions broiled at these guards who were just doing their jobs. The angry bitterness I felt returned in full force. It was like part of me stepped aside and let someone else dictate my feelings. How strange that I didn’t feel upset or disappointed. If anything I felt only indignation. Righteous indignation.

“Now before anyone does something hasty,” I began. But simply breaking the silence was enough to force their hand. A guard blasted his flugelhorn with all the power in his lungs. “What did I **Just *TELL YOU?!***” I roared.

Doing something hasty, I barreled straight through the two of them and took off running at top speed. My eyes were as green as the spring and as cold as the winter, and their mists of bitter darkness flowed freely.

The instant Princess Cadence heard that sound, she blasted into the air, wings flapping faster than a hummingbird's, and started circling through the air in search of her prey. "SOMBRA!" Cadence's voice echoed distantly from above. A pink blur zipped across the sky with no discernable bearing other than to move as fast as her wings could carry her.

Shining Armor, back on the ground, watched her swoop around wildly. "She needs a vacation."

He felt that he should have been the one to challenge and ultimately capture me, especially with his wife starting to bend under pressure. The unicorn grumbled at the thought of leaving her to go fight by herself, and, he could admit to his shame, at the lost opportunity for payback.

Walking back to Princess Luna, the captain scanned her over and found few obvious injuries. "Any chance of you getting up?" He asked, lifting her eyelids to check her pupils.

"Wheh?" The princess's eyes rolled in opposite directions.

"Didn't think so. Okay, Luna, let's get you back to the palace." Shining Armor gingerly picked her up with his pink bubble of magic. He kept her steady and made sure not to move her head or spine too much.

Princess Luna stirred in his grasp. "Thaa skyssss falnnnnng..." the night-pony slurred.

"And find you a nurse."

All the able bodies of an Empire pursued me. Every guard – the entire city's armed forces and police service – were sortied to hunt me down. This easily constituted one of the largest manhunts ever conducted on Equestrian soil (or a protectorate thereof.)

Civilians abandoned the streets, so the only other souls outside were the soldiers closing in on my location. A cacophony of flugelhorns resounded like bombing sirens. Without Luna escorting me, I was just a criminal. But my mission transcended the law. They could not stop me. *No one could stop me.*

It was no longer fear that strengthened my resolve; it was desperation. Frustration made my hate-powered magic stronger and that magic made me more susceptible to those same feelings. Heavy

emotions and enabling magic circled, and circled, feeding back into one another until I could barely think straight.

But this was me we're talking about. I'd always been able to vent my frustrations into something constructive. So all that raging determination and encroaching bitterness instead got channeled into one steadfast resolution:

I was gonna fix Arrow's roof *no matter what*.

Smoke poured off me as I ran. Small, dark crystals sprouted from the ground wherever I passed. Guards accumulated in the stampede behind me, but they could barely keep up. So many emergency signals went up that it actually hindered their coordination.

I turned down an alleyway to bottleneck the pursuers. Once they followed, I sent a wave of power at them. Because the magic was funneled through the narrow passage, the force perforce enforced its forcefulness on the reinforced forces and they all tumbled down. With another pulse of power I commanded two dark crystals to erupt from the earth. They grew on either side of the alley until the guards were corralled within. It wouldn't hold them for long, but I didn't need long.

"Now is the time," I rumbled and dashed towards my goal. "IT HAS BEGUN!"

A black gale, like the thick smoke of forest fire, raged to the sky with my roaring voice. I became a force of nature and nearly lost myself to the darkness.

My god, this intoxicating feeling. I felt like I could take on the whole world. So much power smoldered within me, just begging – demanding – to be unleashed on all I deemed unworthy. I was all-powerful! Everything was beneath me. Everything *deserved* to be beneath me.

"Shut up, evil magic, I'm working here!" I shouted at no one in particular. Blinking rapidly as if casting off a daydream, my immaterial eyes returned to their red color, but they never stopped spilling that purple mist.

I looked around, and there it was. There was Arrow's house! My murky form, now the size of a fog bank, bolted towards my goal. "**All eyes on me!**" my voice resounded above the din. "From within your homes, from behind your windows, watch! I'll prove to all of you that **I am NOT EVIL!**" So screamed a disembodied death-smog that encompassed an entire city block.

Black smoke whipped out of every shadow and coiled around the crystalline boulders. As easy as a twitch of the finger, these magic limbs heaved dozens of the stones, collectively weighing thousands of pounds, effortlessly into the air. Such power, such magic; it was awful and awe-full. And it was *mine*.

My eyes fogged over again.

"None can oppose me. None can stand before me. Bear witness to my unrivaled power! **Behold!**" There went my self-control. There went tact and foresight. Ladies and gentlemen, dark magic makes you stupid.

"**I! AM! HELPING!**"

That shout echoed several times across the distant plains. All the while immense tendrils, like some kind of smoky kraken, heaved broken boulders into the air. Piece by piece these wisps of dark magic puzzled Crystal Arrow's house together. They held the building in place, and then melded into the structure itself to repair it on a more complete level. Smoke seeped into the cracks, boiled with dark energy, and seemingly disappeared leaving no trace of damage.

How did Luna phrase it, again? Boisterous resolve. Oh, yes, I had that in spades. In short work the house was made whole again. Not a single seem or crack remained.

"More! **MOOOOORE!**" And it wasn't enough! The past few hours instilled me with a voracious appetite that couldn't be extinguished with this one act alone. "**LOOK AT ME!**" I screamed at the empire. "**Look at me straight in the eyes! I want you to *KNOW* what I have done this day!**"

Screaming and cackling, I felt my power wax to omnipotent heights. I looked around and saw that so much more devastation remained. The obfuscous energies pulsed within me and I thought to myself, why stop at one? Why limit myself when I had so much power *writhing* within me? I was a king, was I not? I was a king and the city was MINE! *MY* city was broken and *I* will rebuild it!

"More power, more magic, more shadows! Let **darkness** and *crysssssstallll* RISE at my command!"

It was absolute pandemonium. Shadows, smoke, shards, and stone roiled through the air as if carried by a tornado. My horn – one of the few recognizable features in the abyss of darkness I had become – raged with dark energy. A conflagration of vicious power shed its violet un-light upon all that lay before me. All was mine to control.

And control it I did. Within the storm of smoke, the once ruined crystals began to take shape once more. A collapsed wall here, a fractured house there, they too were healed. Just as I had the power to take their homes from them, it was within me to give them back.

Everything within eyeshot was whole and unblemished. Just as I promised. Just as I set out to do.

"**I DID IT!** Ha Ha! Look at it! Look upon my works and DESPAIR!" I exploded with unhinged ecstasy. "Err… no, the opposite of that. **REJOICE!** Rejoice, all of you, I command it! BWAAA HA HA HA! I told you. I TOLD YOU **AAAALLLLLLLLL!**"

Hail to the King

Elation beyond my wildest dreams flooded my mind. Gone was the bitterness and self-loathing. Gone were the weights in my stomach and the lump in my throat. Gone was the all-encompassing guilt that steered my actions thus far.

And with it, gone was the hate-empowered magic that caused me to make such a fool of myself.

Higher cognitive functions rushed back to me all at once. My eyes returned to normal and I lost the purple haze all in my brain. This must be how werewolves felt when the night ends.

"HAHAHA Ha-Haaa. Haha ha..." The laughter came slower now. "Hee... a... aha... Haaaaa?" Without the evil powers inebriating my mind, I realized that I'd been screaming at the town with all the class and poise of a touchdown celebration.

"...heh?" With that last uncertain chuckle I slowly reconstituted myself back to four hooves. By then the very last remnants of purple and green faded from my eyes. No more crystals flew through the air. No more shadowy wisps slithered about the buildings. Just I and a newly rebuilt street remained.

"... Wow." It was then and there that I learned dark magic was not a toy to be used haphazardly. "That- what was that?" I whispered, admittedly afraid of what had transpired. "It was like I did what I wanted to do, but couldn't control how I did it."

Eyes shrank a bit while the implications sank in. "Uh oh. Just how much of that was me, and how much of it was my evil doom-horn screwing around with my brain?" If the last few minutes were any indication, its influence was anything but subtle.

And it went further than that. Thinking back, it was as if I'd lost all self-awareness and restraint since I first showed up here. Like that letter I sent this morning, or the taunting that provoked Luna into bashing her own head in.

There was something wrong with me. It was like the second I got a thought in my head I couldn't *not* do it. That wasn't the case before I woke up in this body. Was it neurochemistry? Magic?

"I'm gonna need an awful lot of therapy after this."

While I spaced out for those few seconds, I heard a loud, metallic clank from all directions. A whole thicket of spears surrounded me, signifying that the Crystal Empire's armed forces finally made their move and they were none too happy.

"H-H-Hey, everyone- everypony." Those were some pretty sharp spears. The guards clustered in so there was pretty much no space between each one; everybody wanted a piece of me. "Um. I did it? Rejoice?"

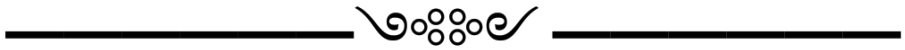
With a synchronized clink of armor, the guard ponies stepped forward a few inches to show they meant business. "King Sombra, under the orders of Captain Shining Armor and her majesty Princess Cadence you are under arrest! Again!"

Twice now, I had escaped from them and they weren't taking any more chances. New rule: no more running from the police. It just makes things worse. I needed to get back to that castle and have a long, open conversation about who – and, more importantly, *what* – King Sombra was. But first I had to deal with the guards. Of course, after that huge public scene, as enraged as the guards were, and as frightened as I was of my own state of mind, only one response made a lick of sense. And that response was to totally wimp out.

"Yep: Palace, now. No contest." I lay flat on my belly. "C'mon! Get the cuffs. Let's go! Arrest me. Are forelegs flexible enough to put around my back? Do you have to recite the Miranda rights? What's the procedure here?" The guards hesitated, having expected more resistance than this. Quite honestly, I was far more freaked out than any of them, so I didn't put up any kind of a fight when the guards formed a big circle and told me to walk at a slow pace. "Hey, no shoving!" I said to one of their more overzealous members. "Good. A nice, easy walk to the palace. Oh! And if my eyes turn weird colors, just run." One of the younger rookies trembled. "Right, sorry, shutting up now. Let's go."

That should've been when things finally cooled off. I kept my head down and tail between my legs. Everything seemed to finally be over.

At least, it seemed that way until I was knocked into next week by Cadence's soaring, screaming, nearly supersonic body slam.



They had one job, and within a twenty-four hour period it all blew up in their faces. Shining Armor could imagine a mob of crystal ponies showing up any minute to demand answers. But right now the captain had a more immediate concern to address.

"Hath the swelling gone down at all?" Luna lifted her icepack so the captain could see the colossal bump on her head.

"It's… wow. Uh, yes! Just fine. You look great, Princess." His words didn't mean a darn thing with the way he averted his eyes like that.

Princess Luna, Equestria's first double-unicorn, replaced her compress, eliciting a hiss of pain from the mare. To endure an impact that could kill a wicked witch left one heck of a mark. "We'll take thy word for it," she replied dryly.

"Well, for what it's worth, you can be certain that Sombra will answer for this. Anypony who threatens our subjects and attacks our leaders will suffer the full consequences of the law, insane or not."

Considering his words, Luna subtly tilted her head side to side as if weighing options in her mind. She then sighed as she came to a decision. “About that. The fault was not entirely his own,” she confessed. “Ultimately, the lion’s share for Our predicament was self-inflicted.”

Shining Armor paused at her admission. “What do you mean? How could it not have been him? I mean, he’s *him.*” The captain expected, and in fact even preferred, that today be a nonstop condemnation of my character and actions, but Luna shook her head.

“What happened today was an accident,” she insisted. “And while We have *many* things to say to that stallion – none of them pleasant – assigning blame for Our injury is not amongst them.” But then her face turned sour. “Except for hurling Us down the stairs. That was all him. No question.” She’d heard about the incident secondhand and was kind of peeved about it. She reconsidered her earlier meteor plan. Surely today’s events begged just one, pea-sized shooting star.

The next few minutes were spent recapping the day’s events. Luna explained how she was talked into the outing in the first place, the failed meeting with the first mare, the crowd, and the incident at Crystal Arrow’s house. Shining Armor listened to it all.

“That’s a lot to soak in,” Shiny said. “But… Princess, I have a question. If you were stuck to the wall, why didn’t you teleport yourself free?”

“We, er…” Luna trailed off for several seconds. “Merciful empyrean, We completely forgot about that.” She slapped her forehead for being so forgetful. “OW!” she yelled, because she smacked her lump with a hoof.

As the princess rubbed her sore head, Shining Armor thought of another question that he kept to himself. This one was significantly more disconcerting to his presupposed opinion of me: Other than the initial escape, if it could be called that, what crimes were committed today? Shining pondered the implications. Although, yes, there were a *lot* of problems today, all of which could be traced to one specific stallion, but were any of those incidents truly malicious? Until now he was merely humoring Celestia’s talk of reformation due to his obligation as her soldier, but could she really have been right?

BAM!

A mighty crash heralded the arrival of Princess Cadence as she kicked in the massive gates of the palace with a single, dainty forehoof. She stomped into the entryway with a scowl on her brow and a snarl on her lips. Her mane and coat were filthy.

Luna smiled at her. “Ah, Princess Cadenza, you return. We trust you had little difficulty apprehending the king?” Her co-princess, however, walked right on by without so much as an acknowledgement.

“Hold this,” Cadence chucked me at her husband like an underpaid baggage handler. Shining Armor had to grab me midair.

"Cadence, where are you going? Hey, wait. Don't just storm off again!"

"Ugh!" Cadence stormed off again. Fuming the whole way, she made a beeline for an exit currently being guarded by a pair of crystal ponies. "RAAARGH!" she ordered. The guards dutifully opened the door and let her inside. Sensing their liege's need for drama, they made certain to slam the door noisily once the princess was through.

Shining and Luna were left blinking at the scene. "Is she well?"

"I don't think so. I knew the stress was getting to her, but this has got to be the worst I've ever seen her."

Behind them, a loud, glassy tapping noise from within Shining's force field interrupted their train of thought. "Guys?" I waved to get their attention. "Can we please shed some light on why and how I turned into a walking apocalypse a few minutes ago?" The two royal ponies both got that uh-oh face. Not many good things could be described by the words 'walking apocalypse.' "Total candor here, I'm actually kinda scared. I feel like I need to see a pony doctor. And I mean an actual pony-doctor, not just a morose-looking guy with a shotgun."

Shining Armor rendered his force field soundproof.

"Now what?" he asked the princess of the night.

"Who's to say?" Luna shrugged. "Based on Our experiences, his motivations are genuine but he still constitutes a real threat, both to himself and others. But there is hope still, provided he hath somepony to guide him. We know not what to make of him. And Celestia did tell us to offer him a second chance," she reminded the prince.

"But we're up to his fifth or sixth chance by now. I'll grant that he may not have ulterior motives, but he still didn't listen to us."

"We never said that his actions are to be without consequence. T'is thy and thy wife's empire. Ye two decide how to proceed." Luna's super-helpful advice boiled down to '*deal with it. I'm out.*' "Fare thee well, Shining Armor," she said as she began to leave the palace. "We wish you and the Princess the very best of luck."

Besides the quiet tapping of her horseshoes on the palace's floor, that was the last we heard from her that day. The princess made her way to the exit, spread her wings, and took off for the southern skies.

Shining Armor dispelled the force field, but by the look on his face, he wanted to do absolutely nothing but sit there for a while and sort things out in his mind. He and I stood alone in the grand entryway for a couple of unfriendly, quiet minutes. I knew he wouldn't respond to me asking about what would happen next, or what their plans were for me, but I didn't want us to stew in bitter silence

so I just blurted out the first thing on my mind. “Hey, Shining, do you think Luna should be flying with that bump on her head?”

The captain already felt the first of many, many new headaches that awaited him in the near future. “No,” he responded. “Probably not.”

Thus, my first foray into Sombra’s redemption-by-proxy ended on a sour note. But I was certain there’d be other opportunities to wash that taste out of my mouth. Because, ultimately, no matter what consequences may result from today’s actions – and yeah, there’d be a heck of a lot of fallout for this – I’d still beam with pride knowing I fulfilled my promise to Crystal Arrow. Now he and his daughter got their home back, and with it, a desperately needed sense of normalcy.

Maybe next time I’d finally score a non-pyrrhic victory. One down, a whole city to go.

Hail to the King ends here

This hilarious fanfiction was published on August 7th 2013, a wonderful literary work that shows that with delirious quips and amazing character work, even an unfinished work can leave an everlasting impact on a person. This is the author’s only work in the Fimfiction platform, archived for my entertainment for any possibility that the site ends up being deleted.

Not too long before this PDF is being worked on, a major Spanish-speaking yaoi fanfiction site had been deleted, making thousands if not many more written works lost media, without being archived. Internet isn’t forever, even if it seems like it. And in case it happens to this platform, I want to keep this fic safe.

I would’ve loved to see Sombra grow into loving Equestria, wanting to make not just the empire but the entire country a better place, growing a sibling like relationship with Luna, heck even Cadence and Shining learning to love his goofy ass. I’m sure the real Sombra would’ve ended up becoming the villain of this story... And because of my necessity for gay romance, I would’ve loved for Crystal Arrow to become a regular character, perhaps become the love interest to this human in Sombra’s body.

We can only dream what could’ve been, as the last chapter was published on December 28th 2014. The author’s last login to the platform was July 21st 2015, making it thirteen years since its publication. Keep on writing, keep on enjoying reading. For art is the most wonderful thing we have.

"I'm not! I really am a bipedal ape-creature from a space-age democracy!" Good God, I was terrible at explanations.